

SPWI JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL WELFARE

(A Multi Disciplinary Peer-Review Bi-Quarterly
Social Science Research Journal)

Volume 4 Issue 4, October-December 2021

Editor

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SOCIETY FOR PUBLIC WELFARE AND INITIATIVES

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SPWI JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL WELFARE
Volume 4 Issue 4, October-December 2021

ISSN 2581-6322



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	<p style="text-align: center;">SPWI JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL WELFARE (A Multi Disciplinary Peer-Review Bi-Quarterly Social Science Research Journal) Volume : 4 Issue : 4 October-December 2021 An ISO 9001-2015 Certified Journal</p>
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SEVEN EXODUS OF KASHMIRI PANDITS – A STUDY

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Abstract: *Recently Vivek Agnihotri's 'The Kashmir Files' has once again brought to the fore the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits and how they have forced off their homes in the early 1990s. The atrocities perpetrated upon the community, scars of which are still fresh in the minds of many, saw an estimated 4 lakh Kashmiri Hindus leaving the Kashmir valley in a matter of weeks between February–and March 1990. However, that was not the first time that Kashmiri Pandits had been forced to abandon their homes and livelihoods. Let's take a look at the six other times their rights were trampled upon. In this article, I have tried to explain the seven exoduses of Kashmiri Pandits from (1938-to 1990).*

Introduction

So much has been sung of the marvellous and magnificent beauty of the physiography of Kashmir, 'Paradise on Earth' by saints and sages, philosophers and poets, mystics and bards, divines and emperors, historians and travellers from far and near, that I wish I could describe one-hundredth of what they have sung. One must possess a born poet, powerful and refined sensibility, imagination and vision together with the boldness of his pen to be able to attempt to sing of her charms with full-throated ease. The Valley of Kashmir lures all irresistibly. Those who have tramped across the globe have no hesitation in asserting that Kashmir is a land of peerless beauty on this planet. It excels in the beauty of Switzerland. Bowl-shaped with lofty mountains standing guard all around, cradled in the Himalayas, Kashmir has everything to gratify all the senses with thrilling experiences and to seekers of peace, it gives a satisfaction that is much more solid and enduring than a thrill.

With its salubrious climate that infuses health and heartiness into a sickman, its bewitching, quite idyllic scenery, its arresting landscape, its snow-capped peaks from which flow perennially murmuring streams rivulets and sinuous rills and cataracts guttering, like glass, fit for angels to repose by its mists and clouds that rises skywards like swirling smoke of the incense, its remarkably exquisite dawns and day breaks and equally enjoyable dusky evenings, its ancient and mysterious all-encompassing woods and evergreen forests that are home to a treasure of fauna and flora, its gorgeously colourful meadows, its warbling birds, its tranquil and placid blue lakes, bubbling springs, its sprawling orchards laden with tempting juicy sweet and delicious fruit, its pleasure gardens and grottos, its breezes that kiss gently and tenderly and a variety of other gifts of nature that beggar description, this happy and has been the chosen land of God and to which nature has been lavish in her bounty. A newcomer here falls in love with it at first sight and cannot help being swept away by a feeling of rapture and unearthly joy. He stands and stares around in wonder. The magnetic beauty of the land draws him closer and closer and spellbound he saunters about and deeper the wonder grows and the more unwilling he becomes to part from it.

The germ of his attitude and response to the surroundings is essentially the environment of unearthly peace, tranquillity, calm and security. Here peace rains imperceptibly from heaven and settles in every nook and corner. Here peace descends from mountain tops and cliffs, emanates from deep woods and forests, exudes from gardens and orchards and finds retreats in every house and habitation and in habitation. It gives a feeling of the uplift of the spirit whereby a person merges and mingles with everything around him and everything becomes part of his being. No one escapes this spiritual feeling which is not a simple pleasure. No wonder, then, that this spirituality forms the woof and web of the more than five thousand years old culture of Kashmir. This abode of peace and, the seat of the Goddess of learning.

Shahjahan exclaimed, "If there is paradise on the earth it is here, it is here." Pandit Brij Narain Chakbast sang, particles of my motherland, Kashmir are known for their hospitality. Not to speak of its lakes and cascades, even the wayside pebbles quenched my thirst whenever the need arose." It is but natural that such physiography of Kashmir should get reflected in the character of its ancient inhabitants who are nice, good, gentle and harmony gave birth to myriad saints and sages who attained the highest goals of life by meditation. The mother of the three worlds and consort of Lord Shiva Parvati, chose to take her birth in this hallowed land the Maharagni came flying from the deep south to make it her home Lord Shiva himself made it his abode. It is Sharda Peetha lovable, devoid of malice and crookedness. Kashmir has been a Sangam, a meeting place of various communities and sects professing different faiths, beliefs and creeds and all co-existing in perfect harmony and tolerance. Practising respect for others' beliefs they had a world outlook and knew no conflicts arise out of racial and religious differences.

The aboriginal inhabitants of Kashmir, the Kashmiri Hindus, in common parlance known as Kashmiri Pandits (KPS) constitute a distinct class of their own and are considered to be the purest specimen of the ancient Aryan settlements on the banks of the river Saraswati migrated to Kashmir Valley in wake of the changing course of the river and eventually becoming invisible, having been dried up. The offspring of rishis and seers and sages and belonging to the highest order of Brahmins, this small community of the Samswats have been and still are by and large, sober, peace-loving and docile. They are among the few ancient surviving races whose traditions come down from the Gods. They are characterized by their being highly educated and learned. Vidyadhars, with more than 95% literacy, has produced a galaxy of brilliant sages, saints, poets and statesmen, administrators and ambassadors, who made a lasting contribution to the development of the Indian composite heritage and culture.

When Islam came to Kashmir, it brought conflict as it brought wherever its followers went. The KPs withstood and despite centuries upon centuries of humiliation, persecution, repression and torture at the hands of foreign rulers they survived. They passed through numerous periods of shame and indignity and physical vicissitudes, yet century after century they have recovered their glory by their power of self-preservation. They have succeeded against fierce odds in preserving their rich cultural heritage bequeathed to them by their forebears who were men and women as great saints, free thinkers, intellectuals and literary giants showing matchless maturity and tolerance. Kashmiri Pandit is the product of that vibrant, vigorous and unfettered, broad, exciting and tolerant culture and civilization that has never shown apathy and aversion to new and alien influences, thoughts and faiths whenever they came into contact with them. And to this day he is known for his dignity of soul, true valour, tolerance, piety, hospitality and forbearance. There is evidence of the synthesis of KP culture with ancient Greek, Roman and pre-Islamic Persian culture. Tolerance has been and continues to be the hallmark of KP culture, despite severe pressure to make it contrary.

Buddhism acclaimed the most tolerant religion/way of life known to the world, came to Kashmir much earlier than Islam, neither in the form of political nor religious conquest, as the latter did. It only stimulated a new culture and religious resurgence without producing a clash or conflict with the Samanta Dharma. Thus, KPs joyfully joined the ranks of the Buddhist Church and endowed it with new directions, opening new vistas and leading to a new enrichment.

History bears witness that no fewer than 700 KP Brahmin monks crossed the inaccessible mountains and carried the message of Buddha to Tibet, China and Central Asia. As a mature and tolerant race, the KPs always upheld freedom of thought and free inquiry and in this background, forcible conversion was unknown to KP ethos. The interpenetration and intermingling of Buddhism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism into a reformed form of Hinduism with its fundamentals remaining unchanged has been the sequel of the most tolerant cultural ethos obtained in Kashmir before the coming of

Islam. During the Hindu rule, there was absolute harmony socio-political plane and the idea of conversion was something unknown and non-existent in the Kashmiri culture. Hindu places of worship and prayer have never been misused as centres of preaching and propagating intolerance and religious bigotry and hatred to other faiths and creeds nor for inciting and abetting sedition nor as repositories of arms and ammunition, nor for providing secure shelter to sinners and criminals. The scope of their use has ever been confined to purely religious, moral-philosophical and literary pursuits. The KP ethos echoes the basic Hindu ethos of equality and coexistence of all religions (Sarva Dharma Sambhava), of the entire mankind being of but one family, (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam), of praying for the well being of entire mankind (Sarve Bhadrani Pashyantu), not only for a particular group or community of co-religionists. It has always been a vehicle for transmitting the message of peace, brotherhood and co-existence of all faiths, never contaminated religion by an immoral union with politics. Such an unholy alliance had no place in the scheme of things as conceptualized by the KPs right from the beginning of their history in the hoary past. And this heritage and outlook they possess even today. With their high profile thinking beyond banal mundane themes, they turned Kashmir into a seat of invigorating, illuminating and emancipating intellectual occupation that attracted all in quest of higher values and spiritual exaltation.

The entire socio-political and religious structure of KP society in Kashmir suffered a subversion at the beginning of the thirteenth century with the appearance on the scene of several Muslim ambitious adventurers and upstarts from far off alien lands. Harassed and faced with physical liquidation at the hands of their arch-rivals and enemies in their respective countries they fled from there and found a haven of refuge and safety and security in spiritually stable though politically unstable Kashmir. Rinchena fugitive refugee from Ladakh, Shah Mir was forced to flee from Swat for his life and Bulbul Shah from Turkistan was given shelter in Kashmir, abiding by the glorious heritage of extending consideration, compassion and kindness and hospitality to those seeking refuge, irrespective of their beliefs and faith. And in true Kashmiri Pandit tradition, they were permitted to practice their faith with full freedom without anybody raising any objection. They found the native's peace-loving and unorthodox to a fault and a country a propitious ground for their ulterior motives; therefore, they stayed on and enjoyed the generosity and hospitality of the Hindus rulers as well as the common people.

Before long they started preparing for grinding their axe and began to behave like the proverbial Arabian camel cunningly occupied the tent by steadily nudging its owner out. These refugees, feeding fat on the hospitality of the people and building up pockets of influence became ambitious of seizing power and grabbing the throne with a particular design up their sleeves, transforming the entire religious and demographic profile of Kashmir. History bears witness to the glaring fact that they were responsible for creating and shaping conditions in Kashmir, which caused intolerable affliction, miseries, torture, persecution, cruelty and pain to the KPs in the name of Allah. The

reader experiences convulsions at the cruelties and indignities heaped on the helpless KPs for the holy cause of the spread of Islam. This is how they repaid the munificence and benevolence of the Hindu rulers.

Zul Qadir Khan, a Turkish Tartar, leading his savage hordes of tens of thousands looted and plundered and massacred the Hindus and razed the standing crops to ashes, thus spreading death, dissolution and ruin throughout the land for full eight months. The approach of winter forced him to return. He took with him 50,000 Kashmiri men and women and children as slaves to be sold in Turkish. As fate would have it, the barbaric heartless Khan was caught in a blizzard while traversing the mountainous path 'Of Devsar Pass' and the entire mass of people perished in the cold snow. This place is called 'Bata Sagan' (Brahman's death oven).

Jonraj a Kashmiri historian of the time paints a harrowing picture of the havoc and horror-struck by Zul Qadir Khan in his spree of massacres that decimated the Kashmir Hindus. The land having been marauded, mangled, thousands died of poverty and starvation as if doom "pralaya" had overwhelmed the country. The carnage turned rivers and brook scarlet and gory with human blood.

Rinchen thought to be Buddhist by faith, received shelter and sustenance and safety under the wings of Ram Chander a KP Commander-in-Chief, who betrayed and got killed to pounce upon the throne of Kashmir. Since he was an alien, he sought to identify himself with a set of people with avested interest. Bul Shah, one of them trickily converted Rinchen to Islam under the name of Saderud Din. And as the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir and with his convert's missionary zeal Rinchen started his campaign for the mass conversion of KPs to Islam with all the brutal vigour and force at his disposal. It was Bul Bul Shah who incited, aided and abetted Rinchen to persecute and tyrannize the resistant Hindus and used all sorts of unfair ways and means like a compulsion, taxation, unjust law, use of the sword and forcible inter-marriages. Guided by him Rinchen pioneered the path for the later Muslim rulers to depopulate, dominate, degrade and drive KPs out of their ancestral land.

First Exodus

The first exodus of Kashmiri Pandita happened during the reign of Sultan Sikandar Shah (1389–1413 CE) who unleashed an Islamic terror crusade. Throughout the Kashmir Valley, Hindu temples were razed, and mosques were constructed in their place. According to the Centre for Integrated and Holistic Studies, native Hindus were subjected to forced conversions, pillage, looting, rapes, and other forms of brutality. This forced thousands to leave the Kashmir Valley to protect themselves.

Second Exodus

The second exodus happened during the reign of Fateh Shah II (1505–1514 CE), who was influenced by Shams-Ud-Din Araqi, a Noorbakshi Shi'a Sufi who resurrected the heinous practice of persecuting Hindus.

Third Exodus

Following the demise of the Shah Miri dynasty had fallen apart. In 1585 CE, Akbar ultimately took over and began a new period of relative restraint. Jahangir was a great admirer of the Kashmir Valley, and he spent much time there during the summers. Jahangir and Shahjahan essentially reversed the toleration policy of Akbar. Sardar Itquad Khan, Jahangir's notorious commander, specialised in converting Hindus under torture. Aurangzeb and his infamous governor, Iftekhar Khan, continued the reign of terror that had been imposed on Kashmiri Hindus by his predecessors. This triggered yet another exodus of Kashmiri Hindus.

Fourth Exodus

This happened when the Durrani of Afghanistan took control of the Kashmir Valley in 1753. They were just like Aurangzeb in their cruelty. According to the Centre for Integrated and Holistic Studies, Sikhs took control of Kashmir in 1819. However, the invading British ceded the territory to Gulab Singh, the Dogra king, upon Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death, and the Native Kashmiri culture resurfaced. It's worth noting that during the Sikh and Dogra periods, the Valley's majority of Muslims were not subjected to any religious persecution.

Fifth Exodus

An incident involving a British officer's cook Abdul Qadeer on July 13, 1931, flared up and took a violent turn. The trial of Qadeer, who faced sedition charges for his fiery remarks against Maharaja Hari Singh, stirred up sentiments. The tipping point came when protesters who had gathered outside Central Jail Srinagar and were raising slogans against the Dogra rule were fired upon. The orders were given by the local Governor Turlok Chand. Reports suggest that 21 Muslim protesters were killed in the firing. That incident triggered communal violence in areas like Naushehra, Bohri Kadal and Khan-Kahi-Moula. Kashmiri Pandits were targeted attacked and ransacked. There was rioting in several areas and properties of the minority community were razed to the ground.

Sixth Exodus

Between 1950-and 1980, the condition of the Kashmiri Pandits deteriorated even further. A series of protests kept stoking resentment between Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits. Post-independence, Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence-backed groups started pushing for the Islamization of Kashmir and bred hatred for Kashmiri Pandits. There were concerted efforts made to orchestrate a public relations campaign to change the Kashmiri people.

Seventh Exodus

The late 1980s saw Pakistan-backed terrorism in full force in Kashmir. Terrorist outfits were brutal upon Kashmir's minority community. Kashmiri Hindus became victims of targeted killings, rape, threats, and their homes and places of worship were

vandalized. January 1990 saw the most brutal targeting of the Kashmiri Hindu community. Between January 1 and January 19, 319 violent acts, including 114 blasts, 112 arson cases, 21 armed attacks and 72 incidents of mob violence, were reported. To this day, the Kashmir Pandits observe January 19 as 'Holocaust Day'. As per numerous reports, over 4 lakh Kashmiri Hindus left Kashmir between February and March 1990.

The Solution to the Kashmiri Pandits Problem

This January marked thirty-two years of the Kashmiri Pandit exodus from the Kashmir valley. They suffered grave injustice, violence and humiliation before the migration from their social and cultural roots in the Kashmir Valley. Their exodus was due to the communalization of militancy in Kashmir during the 1980s. While no ruling government has applied itself enough to "solve" the uprooting of Pandits from their roots, communal elements have been aggressively using "what about Kashmiri Pandits" every time human rights defenders or others raise the plight of the Muslim minority in India. This minority is now facing an overall erosion of their citizenship rights.

Time and time again, in the aftermath of incidents of communal violence, in particular, human rights groups have tried to put forward the demands for justice and rehabilitation of the victim minority. Instead of being heard, the Hindu nationalists combine in particular, but even others, shout back as a matter of routine—where were you when Kashmiri Pandits were driven away from the Valley? In a way, the tragedy being heaped on one minority is being justified in the name of the suffering of Pandits and the process of violence is being normalized. It is as if two wrongs are being made into a right as if the suffering Muslims or those who are trying to defend minority rights are responsible for the pain of Kashmiri Pandits.

During these past three decades, many political formations have come to power, including the BJP, the Congress, the third front and others. To begin with, when the exodus took place Kashmir was under President's rule and VP Singh's government was in power at the Center. This government had external support from the BJP at that time. Later, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance came to power, where it remained for close to six years starting in 1998, with Atal Bihari Vajpayee the prime minister. Then, from 2014 onward, the BJP led by Narendra Modi as PM came to power with a brute majority for his party. NDA allies are also enjoying some spoils of power, though without any say in the policies being pursued by the government. Modi has absolute power with the Home Minister, Amit Shah occasionally presenting Modi's viewpoints.

Those who habitually blurt out "what about Kashmiri Pandits" are using it as mere rhetoric, to disguise their communal colour. The matters in Kashmir are very disturbing and cannot be attributed to Indian Muslims, as is being projected both overtly and subtly. Today, of course, the steps taken by the Modi government, to abrogate Article 370, abolish clause 35A, and downgrade the status of Jammu and Kashmir from a state to two Union territories, have created a situation where the return of Kashmiri Pandits may have become more difficult.

As the local atmosphere is more stifling in Kashmir today. Its political leaders with democratic potential have been slapped with the Public Safety Act, which puts them under lock and key for, conceivably, a long time without any accountability to the courts. The internet was suspended, communication was stifled, and an atmosphere persists of curtailed freedoms. This situation makes finding any solution to Kashmir's problems even more difficult.

Kashmir has been a vexed issue—it is the suppression of the clause that grants it autonomy that led to a feeling of alienation among its people and propelled the rise of militancy in the region. This unease was supported and exploited by Pakistan. The entry of Al-Qaeda elements into Kashmir, who, having played their role against the Soviet army in the 1980s, communalized the region. The torment of Kashmiri Pandits begins with the entry of hardline elements into Kashmir. Initially, militancy in Kashmir was on the grounds of Kashmiriyat. Kashmiriyat is not Islam but a synthesis of the teachings of Buddha, Vedanta philosophy and Sufi preachings.

Also, the Pandits, who have been an integral part of the Valley, were urged by a goodwill mission shepherded by reputed Kashmiris to stay on. Local Kashmiri Muslims had promised to counter the anti-Pandit atmosphere. Jagmohan, the governor, who later became a minister in the NDA government, instead of providing security to the Pandits thought it fit to provide the facilities for mass migration instead. He could have intensified counter-militancy and protected the vulnerable Pandits. Why this was not done?

Today, "what about Kashmiri Pandits" needs to be given a serious re-think; to move away from the ongoing blamegame and its use as a hammer to beat all Indian Muslims or human rights, defenders. The NDA regime that came to power in 2014 had thought of setting up enclosures to house Pandits in the Valley. Is that a solution? A solution lies in giving them justice. A judicial commission to identify the culprits and legal measures to reassure the Pandit community are needed. Will they wish to return to the Valley if the high-handed and stifling atmosphere there continues, with the large military deployed there? The cultural and religious spaces of Pandits need to be revived and Kashmiriyat has to be made the base of any reconciliation process.

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