

CONFLICT TRENDS

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CONFLICT INDUCED DISPLACEMENT: THE PANDITS OF KASHMIR

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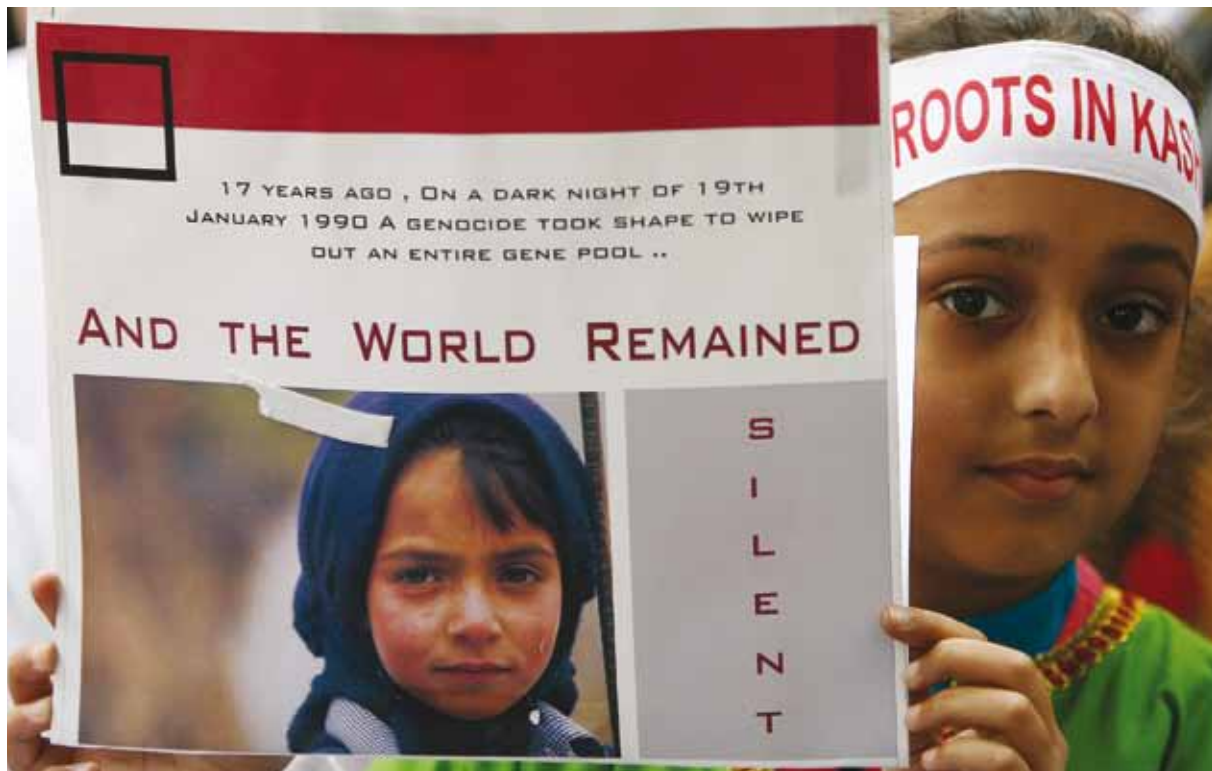


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Displacement is one of the stark realities of the Kashmir conflict. It remains dwarfed by the attention that the conflict itself has drawn. About 10 categories of internally displaced people can be identified. These people have been uprooted due either to the external dimension of the conflict in the form of India-Pakistan hostility, or the internal dimension of the conflict in the form of ongoing violent militancy in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).¹ This article focuses on a particular group of displaced people called the Kashmiri Pandits, as their displacement is considered a prominent factor in the rupture of the cohesive fabric

of Kashmiri society. The displacement of the Pandits is unprecedented in the history of India – virtually the entire community had been forced into exile due to violent militancy. The ongoing peace process – in which India has initiated dialogue with the separatist groups for resolution of the Kashmir conflict – has generated hope for the return of these displaced people, though nothing

Above: Kashmiri Pandit women cry over the violent killing of many of their relatives by disguised militants, at a village in Nadimarg, in March 2003.



Kashmiri Pandit children participate in a demonstration in New Delhi, India to condemn the National Human Rights Commission and other international human rights groups working in Kashmir for not coming to the rescue of the Kashmiri Pandits (2007).

concrete has been achieved yet. Of late, the attempts made to address the grievances of this marginalised group appear minimal, considering the enormity of sufferings of the displaced people and their continuing uncertainty for the future.

The focus of this article, based on extensive surveys in the Kashmir valley as well as in the camps of the displaced Kashmiri Pandits during nine years of doctoral and postdoctoral research, is to highlight the plight of this group. The article argues that, besides providing adequate facilities to displaced people, it is also crucial that they be given a place in the ongoing peace process, for sustainable peace in Kashmir to be ensured.

The Displacement of the Pandits

Despite being small in number, the Kashmiri Pandit community was quite significant in its role in Kashmiri society. Besides being traditionally land owning and highly educated, the Pandits were also closely associated with the courts and administration, making them a highly visible group. The militancy that surfaced in the valley in the late 1980s led to their mass exodus, challenging their socio-cultural identity as well as their livelihood.

The issue of Pandits leaving the valley, after living together amicably with Muslims for centuries, is quite controversial. There are contesting explanations for their en masse exodus. Most Pandits living in the camps on the outskirts of Jammu city believe that they were forced to leave, but there are sharp differences of opinion as to who forced them out. Some blame the whole Kashmiri Muslim community, while many others contend that it was the work of the extremist armed groups, backed by Pakistan. But, all agree that the overall situation was hostile to their existence. It is reported that an intense “vilification campaign” was launched by armed militant organisations against the Kashmiri Pandits.² Rumours were spread that a hit list was prepared of non-Muslims who may be executed unless they left the Kashmir valley. Many Pandits were also reportedly threatened through letters, posters, pamphlets, telephones and advertisements in the press. Some Srinagar-based newspapers also carried threats from militant organisations, asking Pandits to leave. An ultimatum from Hizbul Mujahideen, published in *Alsafa* on 14 April 1990, said: “All Pandits... should leave from here in two days.”³ With some selective killings and rumours of more killings in the near future, the Pandits became



Some of the abandoned houses of Kashmiri Pandits on the banks of the Jehlum river in Srinagar. The Pandits fled the Himalayan region after a Muslim revolt broke out about 20 years ago.

concerned about their safety, and every killing of their close-knit community members started affecting their morale.⁴ Fear was also fuelled by extremist propaganda, even from within the Pandit community. The Pandit elders fuelled panic about the fate that would befall the Kashmiri Pandit women if they did not leave. In addition, the administration failed to assure their safety.

Pandits considered their displacement temporary, but it largely gained the status of permanence with the years passing. Most of the displaced – comprising government employees, traders, peasants and orchard owners, wealthy hoteliers, shopkeepers and even industrialists – initially disembarked in Jammu, since it was the closest Hindu-dominated city. When the number of displaced people rapidly increased, the

administration sprang into action and registered everyone. According to official statistics personally acquired from the Office of the Relief Commissioner in Jammu, as many as 33 618 families were registered with the Relief Organisation in Jammu, including 29 836 Pandit families. Most of these registered displaced Pandits live in the camps, situated at different locations in the Jammu region. They live on a meagre dole in the camps, with minimal facilities. Several families are usually huddled together for years in a single tent or a room.

Life After Displacement

The exodus has changed the lives of Pandits irrevocably in all aspects. A major problem encountered by



A Kashmiri Pandit girl walks inside the Muthi migrant camp on the outskirts of Jammu.

the displaced community is related to the immense economic loss of immovable properties – houses, shops, agricultural land and orchards – that they left behind. They have lost revenue as they are unable to pursue their occupations and businesses. Along with this temporary loss, many of them have also suffered irreparable permanent loss, since their immovable property has been burnt or destroyed. The property of many others was allegedly usurped, either through the tampering of revenue and land records or through illegal encroachment. According to an estimate prepared by the Kashmiri Migrant Fruit Growers Association, about 9 600 Pandit orchardists owned 3 600 hectares of apple, walnut and almond orchards with a total worth of millions of

Indian rupees (INR) in the pre-displacement period.⁵ In the post-displacement era, most of these orchards have been either destroyed or encroached. The houses of many Pandits have also been looted. The enactment of the Jammu and Kashmir Migrant Immovable Property (Preservation, Protection and Restraint on distress Sales) Act 1997 and other legislations notwithstanding, distress sales of the properties continue, and many displaced people have sold their properties for low prices.

Whilst in the valley, the Pandits rigidly stuck to their distinct traditions governing worship, the celebration of religious festivals and elaborate rituals related to birth, initiation, marriage and death. Now, there are perceptible changes in their lifestyle, dress

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Since their displacement, the Kashmiri Pandit community has suffered the dilution and loss of their once strong rituals, traditions and culture.

patterns, eating habits and marriage patterns. Earlier, the community was distinct in terms of dress; now, however, it has mixed with the resident population of Jammu. There has been a dilution of traditional marriage patterns: the Koshur Vanavun (traditional songs sung at weddings and other important occasions) have been replaced by popular movie music. The increasing trend for out-of-community marriages has also been a cause of concern for a small community eager to preserve its identity and cohesiveness. To quote D.L. Chowdhury: "From a scrutiny of 511 wedding invitation cards, it was found that 45% were out of the community."⁶ Even the most auspicious festivals are now not celebrated with the same enthusiasm, and many rituals are evaded.⁷ The ruptured social fabric of this once close-knit Pandit community, with strong intra-community linkages, has affected their lives greatly. Also, the traditional family pattern of joint families has been largely disturbed. It has now been replaced by a nuclear family structure, since the government has provided only one room to a family, regardless of the number of family members.

The Kashmiri Pandit community traditionally had a very high literacy rate, but education has become a matter of serious concern for them in the post-displacement era. The exodus disrupted the education of thousands of Pandit students. Initially, quite a large number of them could not pursue or complete their studies, due to the indifference shown by the government. Many others lost precious years of their studies before the government made alternative educational arrangements. Even at a later stage, the displaced students have been denied admission to mainstream educational institutions. They have had to continue their education in the camp schools, camp college and camp university. These educational arrangements have not only been discriminatory, but also far from satisfactory in terms of the facilities and infrastructure. The displaced students also suffered delays in the conducting of examinations and the declaration of results. All this not only affected the academic performance of the displaced students, but also reminded them of their permanent marginalisation. Notwithstanding the odds, the displaced students have availed every opportunity to maintain their academic

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excellence – but the limited opportunities have not been able to cater to the needs of a large number of aspirants. Reportedly, the majority of the Pandit government employees have retired, and the community alleges facing discrimination in government employment.⁸ Out of 140 000 posts filled by the National Conference Government in J&K during its tenure from 1996 to 2002, not even 1% of the posts was provided to Kashmiri Pandits. The denial of employment avenues to displaced people has been affecting the very survival of the Pandit community.

The Pandits have faced many health problems as well. The trauma of displacement, the problems of adjustment to an entirely different and hostile environment, to which they were not habituated, and so on, have afflicted many with severe health problems – both physical as well as psychological. More than 8 000 displaced

people died prematurely during the first 10 years of displacement.⁹ The causes of death have been exposure to the hostile environment, snake bites, heat stroke,¹⁰ heart problems and other ailments. The displaced people are experiencing a perceptible increase in both existent health problems as well as many new disorders, which were previously unknown or rare in the community. The problems that have become common among the camp dwellers are heat stroke, dengue fever, malaria, dysentery, jaundice, allergies, tuberculosis, bronchial asthma, pneumonia and skin diseases like scabies. Stress-related diabetes has also become rampant among displaced people of even a young age. This has not only adversely affected the productive years of their lives, but also has led to impotency in many cases. Psychological and metabolic stress, coupled with other factors, has also led to a sharp rise in deaths and a decline in the birth



Kashmiri Pandits demonstrate against their forced displacement and request involvement in the peace process.

rate. Other psychological disorders that have become rampant include depression, hypertension, insomnia, nightmares, hysteria, schizophrenia and phobias.

Despite claims by the authorities that all necessary facilities have been provided to the displaced people, the camp-dwellers lead a miserable life. Conditions in all the camps – set up on the fringes of the city – are grim. Currently, besides the cash relief of a maximum amount of INR 4 000 per family, each displaced family has been provided with 9 kg rice and 2 kg wheat flour per person, and 1 kg sugar per family, on a monthly basis. The displaced people find this relief meagre. There is a lack of basic amenities, proper sanitary systems and hygienic surroundings. The accommodation, comprising a single room regardless of the size of the family, has also been far from satisfactory. Even the material used in the structures is of sub-standard quality. Many of the single-room tenements have cracked prematurely and are about to collapse.

The recapitulation of the Kashmiri Pandit's story in the post-displacement era assumes a necessary part in the general conflict displacement discourse, and particularly in the context of the Kashmir conflict. An in-depth look at the suffering of the displaced Pandits living in camps brings into focus the difficulties faced by the displaced people – which usually continues unabated, even with the meagre relief measures for their survival. This life experience of displacement and all it entails is not just confined to the lives of the Pandits alone, but to displaced people in general, across the globe. It necessitates an urgency to examine and address seriously the issue of conflict-induced displacement, which has become characteristic of modern-day conflicts.

Conclusion

The conflict-induced displacement of the Kashmiri Pandits is multidimensional in nature, as a single factor does not explain their en masse exodus from the Kashmir valley. Their post-displacement suffering in squalid camps highlights the sordid tale of those forced to leave their native homes due to violence, and who have to live in miserable conditions with no significant place in the overall conflict or resolution discourse. While fear, intimidation, militant violence and the need to survive are some of the factors that forced them to leave the valley, more poignantly, it is their marginalisation in the post-displacement scenario where authorities have largely adopted an apathetic attitude towards their suffering, that is most significant. Merely doling out meagre relief has not substantially helped these people to live a dignified life. The poor life conditions in the camps is the picture and representation of hopelessness and frustration.

There is a need to take urgent measures to address the suffering of the uprooted people, and to arrange the permanent return to their native places. For the achievement of such tasks, a multi-pronged strategy is required. Besides addressing immediate concerns, such as the poor conditions in camps, broader concerns – such as their return – need to be factored into a comprehensive strategy. The ongoing peace process in Kashmir has evoked optimism among the displaced people. But, as they rightly argue, unless the peace process is inclusive of their voices and needs, the gains may be lost without any significant impact. Hence, the authorities must address the issue with urgency – not as a mere problem in relief and compensation, but also as an integral issue towards a lasting solution for peace in Kashmir. **A**

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Endnotes

- 1 Shekhawat, Seema (2006) *Conflict and Displacement in Jammu and Kashmir: The Gender Dimension*. New Delhi: Saksham Books International.
- 2 Teng, M.K. and Gadoo, C.L. (1998) *Kashmir: Militancy and Human Rights*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications, p. 74.
- 3 Teng, M.K. and Gadoo, C.L. (1991) *White Paper on Kashmir*. New Delhi: Geoffrey Bell and Publishers, p. 116.
- 4 Shivpuri, B.L. (1998) *Regional Minority: Crisis and Alienation: A Case Study of Kashmiri Pandits*. In Kaul, Shyam Lal and Kachru, Onkar (eds.) *Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh: Ringside View*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, p. 220.
- 5 Warikoo, K. (2001) *Kashmiri Pandits in Retrospect and Prospect*. In Kaw, M.K. (ed.) *Kashmiri Pandits: Looking to the Future*. New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation, p. 236.
- 6 Chowdhury, D.L. (2004) *Kashmiri Pandit Women in Diaspora-II*. *Koshur Samachar*, 52 (12), p. 25.
- 7 For instance, the performance of Yagnopaveet (a sacred thread ceremony) – which, at one stage, was considered the most important event in a Kashmiri Pandit's life and involved a ceremony extending over a couple of days, including continuous Yagya (burning of fire) for about 20 hours – is now completed in just a few hours. Kau, I.P.L. (2003) *Whither Hinduism*. *Koshur Samachar*, 52 (4), pp. 29-30.
- 8 'Jammu and Kashmir: Kashmiri Pandit Refugees Submit Memorandum to UNO', Available at: <[http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpDocuments\)/40CD10DE5908A2A5C12572C300514E44/\\$file/Kashmiri+Pandit+refugees+submit+memorandum+to+UNO.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpDocuments)/40CD10DE5908A2A5C12572C300514E44/$file/Kashmiri+Pandit+refugees+submit+memorandum+to+UNO.pdf)>.
- 9 Warikoo, K. op. cit., n. 5, p. 235.
- 10 Heat strokes were almost unknown to the Kashmiri Pandits living in the salubrious Kashmir valley. Reportedly, in the first year of displacement (1990), there were as many as 1 056 heat-related deaths. Chowdhury, K.L. (2003) 'Health Trauma in Kashmiri Pandit Refugees', paper presented at a two-day conference on Kashmiri Pandits: Problems and Prospects, ORF, New Delhi, 1-2 September 2003.