

Kashmiri Pandits: The Homeless People

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Abstract:

According to Oxford Dictionary, a refugee is “a person who has been forced to leave his country because of war”. Ironically, the Kashmiri Pandits happen to be the only community, which has become a refugee in their own country! Kashmiri Pandits are the original inhabitants of Kashmir and have been thrown out of the valley by some fundamentalists of Kashmir origin, with the help of other foreign forces. Both the state and the central government have yet not been able to control the situation. Even after 21 years in exile, more than 50,000 of these Kashmiri Hindu refugees are living in hellish conditions in inhabitable refugee camps all over the country. The Pandits became the targets and victims of one of the most successful, though little-known, campaigns of ethnic cleansing in the world. Pogroms of a far lesser magnitude in other parts of the world have attracted international attention, censure and action in support of the victim communities, but this is an insidious campaign that has passed virtually unnoticed. Among the complex reasons for this neglect is, perhaps, the nature of this community itself: where other campaigns of ethnic cleansing have invariably provoked at least some retaliatory violence, the deep tradition and culture of non-violence among the Kashmiri Pandits has made them accept their suffering in silence. The Pandits have rejected several rehabilitation proposals and jobs offered by successive state governments, if they return to the valley as they want the assured security and are just not willing to become cannon fodder for politicians.

Key Words: refugees, fundamentalists, exile, pogrom, rehabilitation proposal

Introduction

In the 1989-1991 time period, nearly 400,000 Kashmiri Pandits were expelled from their native Kashmir valley after a combination of violence and explicit threats by Islamic terrorists aided and inspired by Pakistan. Since 1947, India-Pakistan tensions have continued and spiralled, especially over the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Most recently, tensions between the two warring neighbours culminated in the Kargil invasion by thousands of Pakistani troops and supporting Islamic mercenaries. However, through two decades of continuing violence initiated by Pakistani elements, most of the hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits who have been expelled from their homeland continue to be ignored at the state, national and international level. Most of the Pandit refugees, mislabeled as "migrants", live in squalid camps with spiralling health and economic problems. That the Muslim-led state government of Jammu and Kashmir has ignored their plight comes as no surprise since the oppression of Kashmiri Pandits did not start in 1989, but much earlier. Between 1947 and 1989, hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits had left the valley to escape oppression by the Muslim majority.

History

Kashmiri Pandit refers to a person who belongs to a sect of Hindu Brahmins originating from Kashmir, a mountainous region in South Asia. Kashmir's association with Hinduism is very old. The very name *Kashmir* is said to be derived from Kashyapa, one of the seven Rishis in Hindu mythology. Most Kashmiri Pandits are devout Shaivites, however many Kashmiri Pandit families who had migrated into other Indian territories have been ardent Vaishnavites as well. Kashmir is home to some of the holiest shrines in Hinduism like Amarnath, Kheer Bhawani, Shrine of Sharada, Shankaracharya Mandir, Hari Parbat and Zeethyar.

Persecution under Islamic Rulers

During the period of Islamic rule of the Kashmir valley many Kashmiri Pandits gradually migrated to other parts of India to look for better economic prospects and to escape restrictions imposed upon non-Muslims in the valley. Many Kashmiri Pandits and Buddhists had to convert to Islam which in time resulted in Kashmir becoming predominantly Muslim. The devastation wrought by Zulju, a Turkish general from Turkmenistan, in 1320, during his conquest of many regions of Kashmir Valley was especially noteworthy. Another Muslim ruler known for the persecution of non-Muslim populations was Sultan Sikander Butshikan (1389-1413) seventh Muslim ruler in Kashmir, and the second Sultan of the Kashmiri Sayyid Dynasty. Many Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave the Kashmir valley during his reign. Historians call him an iconoclast or idol-breaker, due to destruction of many Hindu idols and temples. During the reign of Butshikan, Islam was firmly established in Kashmir and the Hindu population fell drastically. Sultan Ali Shah and others followed suit. There have been a few Muslim rulers who were very tolerant towards the Pandits and were able to ultimately alleviate the plight of the Pandits. From the 14th century due to the conversions to Islam the numbers of Kashmir Pandits in the valley began to diminish. According to the oral history of Kashmiri Pandits, at one point, only eleven families of Pandits remained in the Valley. The Kashmiri Pandits also called Kashmiri Battas in the local Kashmiri language gained enormous privileges during the Sikh and Dogra rulers and post independence so much so that at one time all government offices, banks, colleges/universities in Kashmir only had Kashmiri Pandits employed in them. This set in a

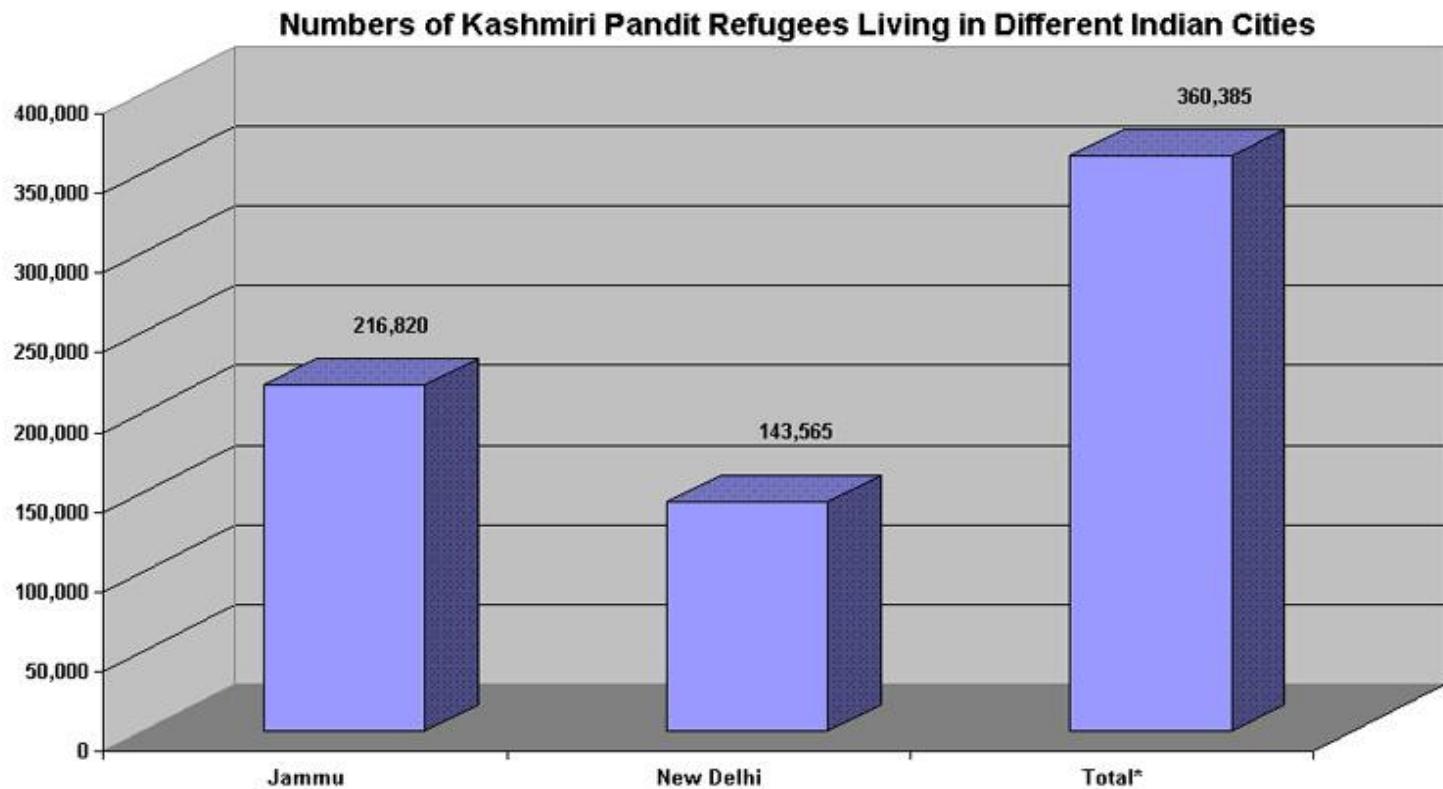
series of political changes in the situation on the ground eventually leading to mass exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits.

Exodus (1985-1995)

On January 19, 1990, a Kashmiri Pandit nurse working at the Soura Medical College Hospital in Srinagar was raped and later killed by Pakistan-backed terrorists. The incident was preceded by massacres of Pandit families in the Telwani and Sangrama villages of Budgam district and other places in the Kashmir Valley. While the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) claimed a 'secular' agenda of liberation from Indian rule, the terrorist intent was clearly to drive non-Muslim 'infidels' out of the State and establish *Nizam-e-Mustafa* (literally, the Order of the Prophet; government according to the Shariah). Accounts of Pandits from this traumatic period reveal that it was not unusual to see posters and announcements – including many articles and declarations in local newspapers – telling them to leave the Valley. Pandit properties were either destroyed or taken over by terrorists or by local Muslims, and there was a continuous succession of brutal killings, a trend that continues even today.

The following charts depict the Kashmiri Pandit refugee situation and provide some glimpses into the extent of the targeting of Hindus carried out by Pakistan-inspired and -aided terrorists in the state:

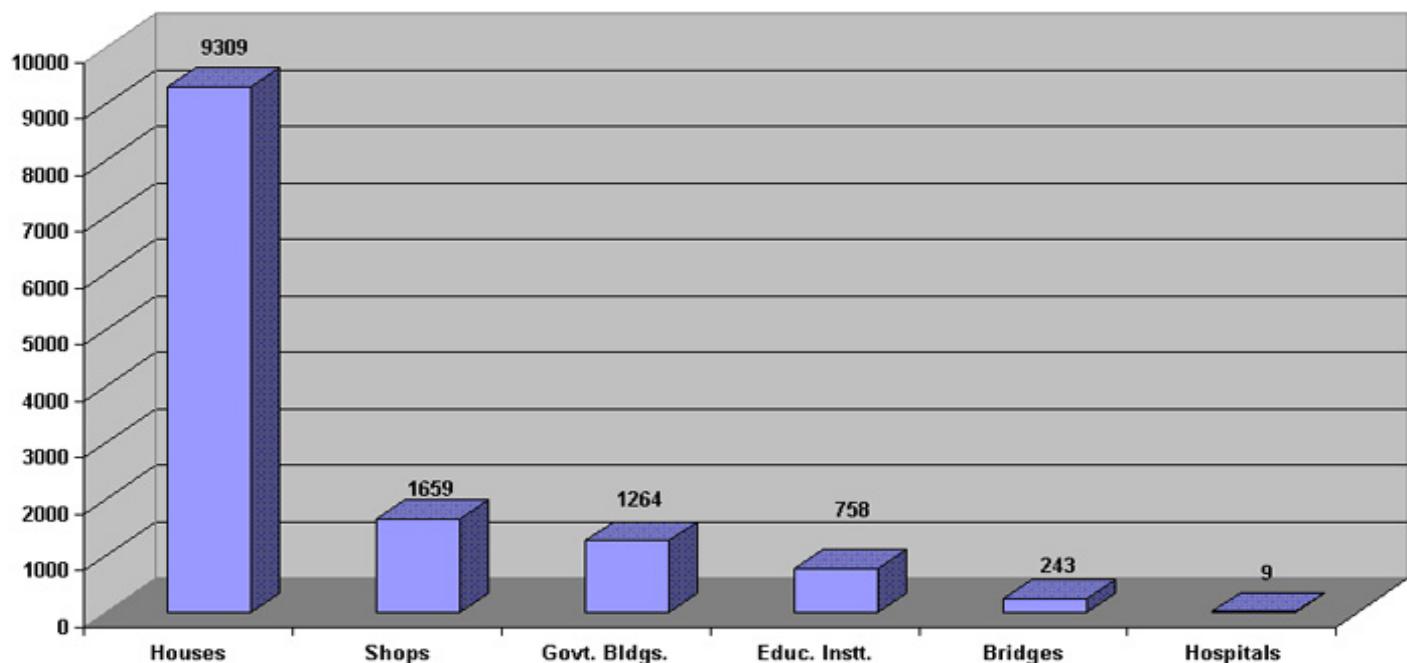
Fig. 1



Data from Rediff.com, July 13, 1999. The report lists numbers of Kashmiri Pandit families who were forced out of Kashmir valley in the 1989-1991 period. The number of individuals reported in this chart is arrived at by assuming an average family size of 5. The total number is incomplete - thousands of other "migrants" are currently located in other cities of India.

Fig. 2

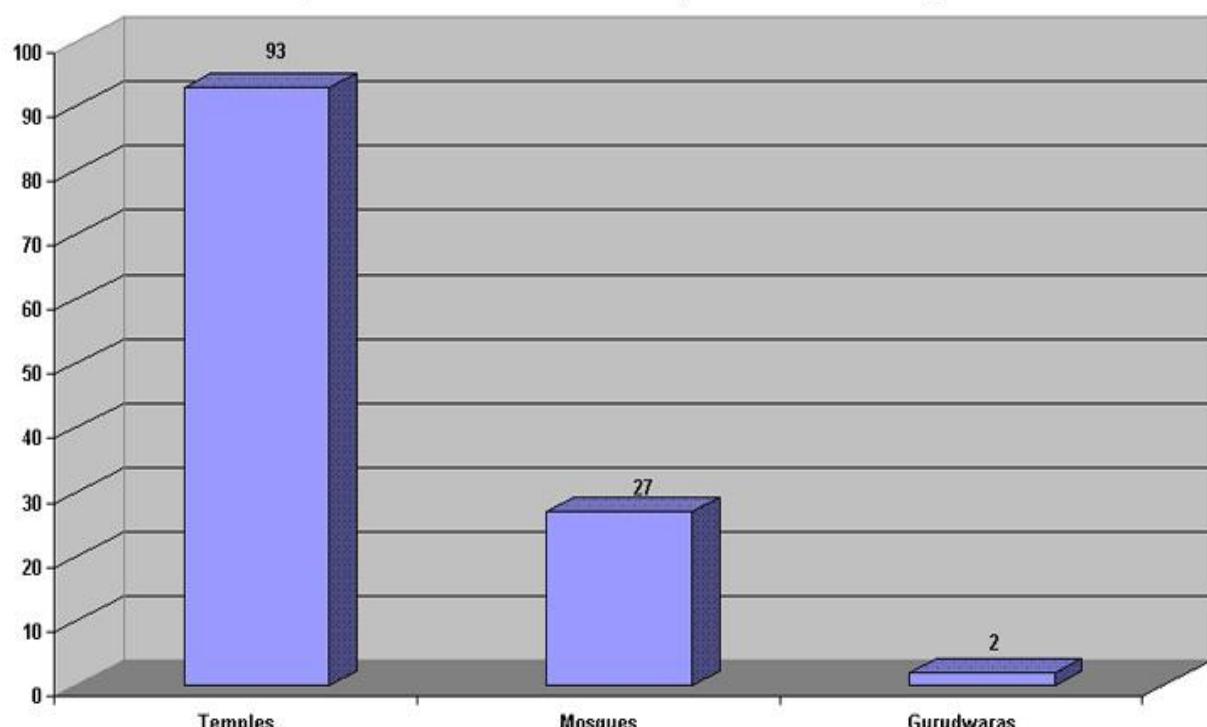
**Glimpses of the Terror That Drove Kashmiri Pandits Out:
Destruction of Buildings in Jammu and Kashmir by Islamic Terrorists, 1990-1997**



Data indicates number of buildings destroyed by Pakistan-aided Islamic terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir.
Most data taken from Rediff.com, July 13, 1999. A majority of houses (5608) destroyed were those of
Kashmiri Pandits (Hindustan Times, Dec. 25, 1998)

Fig. 3

**Glimpses of the Terror That Drove Kashmiri Pandits Out: Religious Places
Destroyed in Jammu and Kashmir by Islamic Terrorists, 1990-1997**



Data indicates number of religious buildings destroyed by Pakistan-aided Islamic terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir. Data taken from Rediff.com, July 13, 1999. The selective targeting against Hindus is evident from the 3.5-fold higher number of destroyed temples compared to mosques in a Muslim majority state.

Ethnic cleansing was evidently a systematic component of the terrorists' strategic agenda in J&K, and estimates suggest that, just between February and March 1990, 140,000 to 160,000 Pandits had fled the Kashmir Valley to Jammu, Delhi, or other parts of the country. Simultaneously, there were a number of high-profile killings of senior Hindu officials, intellectuals and prominent personalities. Eventually, an estimated 400,000 Pandits – over 95 per cent of their original population in the Valley – became part of the neglected statistic of 'internal refugees' who were pushed out of their homes as a result of this campaign of terror. Not only did the Indian state fail to protect them in their homes, successive governments have provided little more than minimal humanitarian relief, and this exiled community seldom features in the discourse on the 'Kashmir issue' and its resolution.

Community in Exile

A majority of the Pandit refugees live in squalid camps with spiralling health and economic problems. Approximately 2,17,000 Pandits still live in abysmal conditions in Jammu with families of five to six people often huddled into a small room. Social workers and psychologists working among them testify that living as refugees in such conditions has taken a severe toll on their physical and mental health. Confronted with the spectre of cultural extinction, the incidence of problems such as insomnia, depression and hypertension have increased and birth rates have declined significantly. A 1997 study based on inquiries at various migrant camps in Jammu and Delhi revealed that there had been only 16 births compared to 49 deaths in about 300 families between 1990 and 1995, a period during which terrorist violence in J&K was at a peak. The deaths were mostly of people in the age group of 20 to 45. Causes for the low birth rates were primarily identified as premature menopause in women, hypo-function of the reproductive system and lack of adequate accommodation and privacy. Doctors treating various Kashmiri Pandit patients assert that they had aged physically and mentally by 10 to 15 years beyond their natural age, and that there was a risk that the Pandits could face extinction if current trends persist. On the conditions at the camps, one report stated that, at the Muthi camp on the outskirts of Jammu where a large number of the Pandits stayed after migration from the Valley, a single room was being shared by three generations. In certain cases at other places, six families lived in a hall separated by partitions of blankets or bed sheets.

Worse, the dangers of this ethnic cleansing are also making inroads into the Muslim dominated areas along the Line of Control and the international border in the Jammu region as well, with Islamist terrorists specifically targeting Hindus in these areas. There is now a steady flow of migration of Hindus from the rural and remote areas of the Jammu region towards Jammu city, and these trends accelerate after each major terrorist outrage. The Pandits have rejected rehabilitation proposals that envision provision of jobs if the displaced people returned to the Valley, indicating that they were not willing to become 'cannon-fodder' for politicians who cannot guarantee their security. The Pandits insist that they will return to the Valley only when they – and not these 'others' – are able to determine that the situation is conducive to their safety. "We cannot go back in the conditions prevailing in Kashmir. We will go back on our own terms," Kashmiri Samiti president Sunil Shakdher said in August 2002 in response to the then Farooq Abdullah regime's proposed rehabilitation agenda. At the minimum level, these terms would include security to life and property and, at a broader level, a consensual rehabilitation scheme.

Various Kashmiri Pandit Organizations including All India Kashmiri Samaj (AIKS), Kashmiri Pandit Sabha (KPS), Jammu Kashmir Nationalist Movement (JKNM), Roots in Kashmir (RIK), Kashmiri Hindu Council. (KHC), Jammu Kashmir National United Front (JKNUF), United Kashmiri Pandit youth Forum (UKPYF), All Displaced Co-ordination Committee (ADCC) & Vitasta Sewa Samaj (Nagrota) have condemned the state as well as Central Govt. for terming Kashmiri Pandits as migrants instead of internally displaced persons. By denying rightful status Kashmiri Pandits have been deprived of a succor that would have been accrued to them as internally displaced persons. Kashmiri Pandits living in exile since 1990 are demanding that they be given the proper nomenclature of Internally Displaced Persons and all facilities recommended for this category of refugees be provided to them in accordance with the norms set forth by the UN Human Rights Charter and relevant bodies of the UN, especially the clause of their concentrated rehabilitation in their original home land with foolproof security.

Rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits

From time to time, the government has been raining sops on Kashmiri Pandits to encourage their honourable return to the Valley 21 years after they migrated. In 2008, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh announced a package worth Rs.1618.40 crore for return and rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandit migrants in the Valley. Main features of the plan included cash assistance of Rs 7.50 lakh for construction and renovation of the house of every migrant who sold his property before 1997, provision of transit accommodation for six months and if the migrants made their own rented arrangement, the govt. promised to reimburse the amount. The migrants who wished to return and set up income generating units were entitled to cash assistance of Rs 5 lakh, of which Rs 2.50 lakh was the subsidy component and Rs 2.50 lakh recoverable in easy instalments. The migrants were entitled for relief for two years after they returned. School-going children were to get a monthly scholarship of Rs 750. Despite repeated assurances by the Centre and the state governments, the Kashmiri Pandits turned down the rehabilitation package and refused to return to the Valley.

The Pandits appear fully justified in their reluctance to fall for the succession of 'rehabilitation schemes' that are periodically announced. Any proposal to return the Pandits to the Valley in the past has usually been followed by targeted terrorist attacks. Whenever any attempt to facilitate their return to the Valley has been initiated, a major incident of terrorist violence against them has occurred. The massacre of 26 Pandits at Wandhama, a hamlet in the Ganderbal area of the Valley on the intervening night of January 25-26, 1998; the earlier killing of eight others at Sangrampora in Budgam district on March 22, 1997; the massacre of 26 Hindus at Prankote in Udhampur District on April 21, 1998; and the killing of 24 Kashmir Pandits at the Nadimarg Village, District Pulwama, on March 23, 2003; these are the worst of the many examples of the terrorists' tactic to block any proposal for the return of migrants to the Valley. These massacres and a continuous succession of targeted individual killings have ensured the failure of every proposal to resolve the problem of the exiled Pandits. It was, again, this pervasive insecurity that led to the collapse of the proposal to create 13 clusters of residential houses in 'secure zones' in different parts of Anantnag for the return and rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandit migrants from outside the Valley in April 2001.

The failure of the State in providing a conducive environment for the return of the displaced Kashmiri Pandits to the Valley notwithstanding, the ex- Prime Minister Manmohan Singh inaugurated the first phase of the township having 800 flats at Jagti in Jammu on 4th March 2011 for the displaced families. The township, to be spread over 100 acres, will cost Rs.385 crore and will have 4,218 flats, hospital, schools, play fields and round-the-clock water and power supply. The ex- prime minister said the township will improve the living standards of the migrants. Though this initiative by the Centre was welcomed by the Kashmiri Pandits living in congested migrant camps near Jammu but a section of the Pandits have demanded a geo-political re-organisation and the carving of a separate homeland for them. While such an extreme suggestion may arise out of the increasing desperation of a people whose plight has been ignored for nearly two decades, the idea itself is fought with the imminent danger of plying into the hands of religious extremists who seek a division of the State along religious lines. Even the present PDP-BJP state government has failed in its endeavor to instill confidence in the community.

One thing is clear, however, that the return of the nearly half a million Kashmiri Pandits to their native land will not be facilitated simply by the end of Pakistani-inspired terrorism in the state. While a cessation of the targeting of Pandits by Islamic terrorists in the state is the essential first step, an end to the oppression by majority Muslims would be the next essential step to enable the Pandits to return as equal citizens.

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