



Migration, Return and Rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits: State Response

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Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 16th June 2013, revised 22nd July 2013, accepted 26th August 2013

Abstract

The Pandits/Hindus living in Kashmir since ancient times constituted significant part of the population. They were living in peace and harmony with their counterparts (Muslims) in Kashmir. The peaceful coexistence and cultural unity between the two communities was referred as *Milchaar*. The politicians have wrongly pronounced this cultural harmony as *Kashmiriyat*. However, *Milchaar* was challenged by the migration of Kashmiri Pandits. An effort has been made to comprehend the *Milchaar* and how it was transformed into *Kashmiriyat*. The motive for displacing a big chunk of population has been analyzed. The improving conditions of Kashmir and Pandits as a stake holder for resolving Kashmir problem are the issues being analyzed by the investigator. This is an attempt to facilitate the return and rehabilitation of Pandits by assuring them that Muslims were never against them and are struggling very hard for their return into the Valley.

Keywords: Pandits, *Milchaar*, *Kashmiriyat*, migration, militancy, return and rehabilitation.

Introduction

The term Pandit refers to Hindu Brahmins living in Kashmir since ancient times. In 19th century, the term referred Hindus not only Brahmins, who stayed in the Valley and neither migrated nor converted to Islam. The term was specific for the Hindus embedded in culture of Kashmir so much that they appeared as Muslims and were living together from centuries as friends and good neighbours. About 4% of the total population in the Valley was those of Pandits.

Milchaar

The Muslims and Hindus of Kashmir were living in an atmosphere of cultural unity and harmonious condition referred in common parlance as *Milchaar* (*Baichara*.) They shared common practices and followed similar code of conduct binding them in an independent social collective. Although both the communities followed the respective religions in letter and spirit but never hesitate in living together in peaceful co-existence and speak same language, *Kausher*, use the same dress, *pharen* and *kangari* for warmth and Kashmiri tea brewing in the houses of both the communities round the day. The Valley of Kashmir was the home 'in simplicity sublime' of *rishis* or sages, hermits and ascetics, cared little for worldly power or enjoyment and glorying in divine love, chose to live on one side or the other of the line that marks the minimum of subsistence. They formed a race, secluded from the world in this Valley, stood aloft by virtue of the purity and the grandeur of their heritage. In the secluded depths of the forests, men pondered deeply upon the nature of things and discussion of the problem of the universe was a favorite pastime. The simple and blameless lives led by these hermit-philosophers, their contempt for wealth and honour, their disinterestedness and above all their extreme sobriety, attracted the attention of the princes and the people¹.

Kashmiriyat: myth or reality

The *Milchaar* has been politicized with *Kashmiriyat* as it is believed that they were not only sharing common culture but participated in each other's festivals and prayers. The Hindus and Muslims no doubt joined one another in joy and sorrow but not at the cost of their respective religion as they formed separate identities. In this respect they preferred pluralism rather than syncretism. Although both the communities were conscious of their faith and socio-political-economic preferences still were living in peaceful co-existence. As the Kashmiris are famous for hospitality and friendliness, minority community didn't feel any threat and were living in comfort². The Pandits consider Kashmir culturally distinct, neither part of India nor Pakistan. Vikram Dhar, a Kashmiri Pandit, himself confessed that Pandits had love and respect for Muslim of the Valley as they consider them their own people, having same culture, history, traditions, tastes, and language and outside Kashmir whenever they met them expressed their emotions by preparing *sheer chai* with best *Malai*, cook Kashmiri dishes and eat together for their psychological satisfaction³.

Kashmiriyat as nationalist ideology was disseminated by its followers through religious sermons in mosques, political rallies, debates, discussions, newspapers, newsletters and magazines. Being politically motivated it was not only supported by nationalist leaders but also by intellectuals of the time as the famous and prominent historian of Mohammad Din Fauq argued that even the people who come from Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, and Turkestan 600-700 years ago mixed so much with the culture of Kashmir, civilization and entered into matrimonial alliances that all the non-Kashmiri traces disappeared from their life⁴. By continually emphasizing the shared history and culture of Kashmiris, Sheikh Abdullah and the National Conference 'raised the pitch of the Kashmiri ethnic

identity, Kashmiriyat, to such heights that the religious edge of that identity had been subdued⁵.

The mysticism advocated by Lal Arifa, 14th century Hindu Shavite and Shaikh Noor-ud-din, Muslim saint of Kashmir (founder of Rishi order in the Valley), considered as Lal Ded's spiritual heir is not syncretism. Given the close affinity between the teachings of Lal Ded and the basic spirit of Islam, the later Sufis of Kashmir count her among the greatest women of Sufis of Islam and bestowed upon her such coveted titles as *Rabi'a Thani*, *Arifa*, *Maryam'I Makani*, *Majnun* etc. In fact, Lal Ded mocks the brahmanical religion and social order, she is no less critical of reducing Saivism to sensualism and socery. She scoffs at exterior manifestations of religious practices (such as idol worship, temple practices, elaborate sacrifices and offerings and pilgrimage to holy places), caste taboos, ascetism and Tantric practices; on the contrary she emphasizes internalization of God by realizing the self and removing the haze of duality and shunning greed, lust and pride⁶. Shaikh Noor-ud-din put more emphasis on purification of soul and criticized mullahs and Brahmans for their involvement in rituals and customs rather than spiritual values and morals. Shaikh Noor-ud-din was preaching Islam in simple way to make it a sort of mass movement in Kashmir as a result large numbers of people accept his creed but that was not syncretism, which is believed to constitute Kashmiriyat. Islam is Islam and there is no such thing as Kashmiri Islam which may be called as Kashmiriyat, it vague and has an uncertain future⁷. It is a handy concept, our culture-or at least the official version of it. It is the biggest remix that was ever concocted-folklore and farce, political fiction and jugglery⁸! The Muslims of Kashmir didn't hate their Hindu counterparts as their forefathers were Brahmans being converted to new faith (Islam) by sufis and rishis. Although Islam is same throughout the world but shades and forms of Hinduism vary from state to state. The Hinduism is more or less quiet and temple oriented in Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh not in other states of India. There is no such noise and smoke in Hindu festivals like *Holi*, *Diwali*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Janamashtami* and *Dussehra* in Jammu & Kashmir as is witnessed from the rest of the states in India. There is so much of noise, drum beating and wild dancing on the roads that any non-Hindu may feel perplexed and scared. The frequented practice of idolatry and hagiolatry in these states also offended and alienated the orthodox Muslims⁹.

Migration: State Response

The worsening communal scenario in India in the decade of the 1980s added fuel to the fire of militancy in Kashmir, started in the later half of 18th century as a consequence of referendum/Plebiscite front organized under the leadership of Mohammad Afzal Baig. Meanwhile, the harmony prevalent in Kashmir received a communal tinge. Non-state actors took advantage of the distortion and targeted Pandits for their own ends. As a result an atmosphere of fear and a sense of insecurity gripped the Hindu community. In this tense situation,

Jagmohan, appointed as the Governor of Jammu & Kashmir was more interested in evacuating the Pandits to deal with the militants in an organized manner. Although, Pandits had decided to migrate in 1986 but the decision remained in abeyance by the intervention of goodwill mission, constituted by prominent Kashmiri Pandits steeped in plural culture. As the militancy stepped up, goodwill mission was dissolved by Jagmohan as one of the members of team was forced to migrate to Jammu. Jagmohan got support from Hindu communal forces in spreading fear and terror in the minority community of Kashmir. Rumours were spread in Jammu and Delhi that Hindu temples and shrines have been desecrated and destroyed in Kashmir. It was strongly opposed by the leaders of Muslim community to the hilt, even now these religious places are respected and secured by the Muslims. However, encouraged by Jagmohan and other communal minds Pandits left the Valley and are living a wretched life in refugee camps in Jammu and rest of India. However, the role of turmoil can't be underestimated in this context but violence was not specific to non-Muslims. It must be noted that among the victims of violence a large number of Muslims were killed or compelled to leave the Valley. Infact, Pandits were well aware and attach a good deal of significance to this naked reality that the first victim of militancy was a Muslim. According to a government report of March 2010, 219 Pandits were targeted by militants from 1989 to 2004. Among these 122 casualties were witnessed between 1 January 1989 and 1 December 1990 and from 2004, no report of such killings came forward¹⁰. However, one can't be callous and mindless in counting over a lakh killed Muslims in scores and a handful of Pandits in hundreds. It is of course a gross insult to the bruised sentiments of Muslim community, never saw a day of comfort since the Valley was occupied by foreign forces, 500 years ago¹¹. Infact, the last decade of 19th century was a time of myth-making and spreading rumours. The Pandits themselves confessed that until today, we don't know who posted that threat. The state supported migration rather than taking any step for assuring them of the security of their lives and property¹². The Pandit families living in Kashmir, not migrated from the Valley are critical of states inability to provide security to the minority community. However, they acknowledged support and protection provided by Muslim neighbours. There are several examples of Muslim neighbours and friends looking after the propriety of non-Muslims.

In the initial years militancy was within the confines of Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, organization fighting for self-determination¹³, and Hindus as a community didn't feel threatened¹³. Infact, the ideology was professed also by Pandits, they were quite compatible with separatist tendencies and were advocating Kashmiri nationalism inspite of the fact that killing of people associated with Indian state arouse fear among them. When the militancy was started in 1989 Pandits participated in anti-Indian procession and provided support to the separatists groups. Balraj Puri stated that there was no hostility between the two communities but security forces were involved in gross human right violations in 1990¹⁴. Thus the tradition and culture

of Kashmir received a serious set-back with this mass migration. Consequently, the minority community shrank from 140,000 in 1980s to 19,865 in 1998. Among these families 34,644 families are in Jammu, 19,338 families in Delhi and 2,398 families in other states/union territories. About 21,927 families are government employs/pensioners and 16,679 families in Jammu and 4100 families in Delhi are getting relief from the government and 237 migrant families in Delhi and 4,778 families in Jammu are living in 14 and 12 camps respectively¹⁵.

The migration put a heavy pressure on government funds as a big chunk of population was to be supported in all respects. The Pandits are getting economic relief not only from state government but Centre is also proving every kind of assistant to these people. They are getting necessary physical facilities like electricity, water, sanitation etc with required accommodation. The table-1 clearly stipulated the relief provide to the migrant families.

Return and Rehabilitation: State Initiatives

The state is very serious in tempting the migrated community to return into the Valley as several measures have been taken in the form of financial assistance/relief and other state initiatives to provide succour and support to the victims. The Jammu and Kashmir Immovable property (preservation, protection and restraint on distress sales) Act of 1997 specified that District Magistrate has taken the possession of immovable property of migrants for preservation, protection and unauthorized occupants are being evicted. The unauthorized occupants of any

usufruct of immovable property of migrants had to pay compensation for the period of unauthorized occupation to be determined by the District Magistrate. For the return and rehabilitation of Pandits, government of India approved construction of 200 flats at Sheikhpora in Budgam district on an experimental basis at an expenditure of 22.90 crore. Consequently, 120 flats have been completed and the project is expected to be completed very soon. The construction of 350 transit accommodation at Kulgam, Baramulla, Pulwama and Kupwara has started and scheduled for completion shortly¹⁶. Besides it the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, announced a package of 1,618.40 crore for return and rehabilitation of Pandits. This package includes provision of assistance in terms of shelter, transit accommodation, cash relief, scholarship, job, assistance to agriculturalists/horticulturists and waiver of interest on loans. The government of Jammu and Kashmir also constituted an Apex Advisory Committee in September 2009 under the Chairmanship of Revenue Minister of Jammu and Kashmir to oversee the implementation of the package. The government received 4,621 applications from migrants willing to return back into the Valley. The State reserved large numbers of posts for migrants and in this endeavour 3,000 have already been advertised and numbers of them have been appointed. The shrines in Mattan and Kheer Bhavani have been developed into model clusters with temporary shelter and about 18 flats at Mattan and 100 one room tenements at Kheer Bhavani have been constructed besides repairing/renovating the shrine¹⁷.

Table-1
Estimate of Relief Extended to the Displaced People from Kashmir#

	Jammu	Delhi	Other States
Families (no's)	34305*	19338*	2603*
Families entitled for relief	13378	12685	2483
Relief Package (cash)	Rs 3000 per family per month	Rs 2400	Rs 2400
Relief Expenses/annum	Rs 481.6 million	Rs 365.3 million	Rs 71.5 million
Rations*	Rice - 9 kgs per month, (@ 14 per kg) Wheat Flour - 2 kgs per month (@ 9 per kg) Sugar-1 kg per month (@ 16 per kg)	Rice - 9 kgs, (@ 14 per kg) Wheat Flour - 2 kgs (@ 9 per kg) Sugar- 1 kg (@ 16 per kg)	Rice - 9 kgs, (@ 14 per kg) Wheat Flour - 2 kgs (@ 9 per kg) Sugar- 1 kg (@ 16 per kg)
Ration Expenditure/annum	Rs 25.68 million per annum	Rs 24.24 million	Rs 4.68 million
Shelter ***	Not included		
Total Relief extended per annum in all the locations	Rs 973 million		

Ministry of Home Affairs, Annual Report 2002-03, 27-29. *Government employees and pensioners numbering 21824 are not entitled for relief. For the sake of calculations these numbers have been divided among the three locations as per the weighted average of number of families living in each of them. **The prices tagged per unit of each item is roughly the market price. ***This relief package does not take into consideration the construction and maintenance of camps and the expenditures on related physical and social infrastructure including toilets, roads, shops, water, electricity, hospital, education and communications.

Improving Ground Level Situation

The conditions are now improving very fast and even the Hurriyat leaders assured Kashmiri Pandits full security¹⁸. Shabir Shah, Hurriyat leader, reported that Kashmiri Pandits have always been a part of our culture and our history ... Kashmir is a garden and there are many flowers in here...Kashmir is incomplete without the Pandits. Kashmiri Pandits should come back to their homes. Syed Ali Geelani, chairman of All Parties Hurriyat Conference, assured them that 90 percent of the Muslim population in Jammu & Kashmir would protect their Hindu brethren if they returned to the Valley¹⁹. But he strongly condemned the creation of separate colonies for Kashmiri Pandits as he believed that Indian government is rehabilitating non-Kashmiri Hindus in these colonies for changing ethnic composition of Kashmir. He stated that Kashmiris have never opposed return of Pandits, but are against creating separate zones for them. It is an attempt to divide Kashmiris along religious lines, which is harmful to the Kashmir cause²⁰. The people of Kashmir expressed their liberal nature as they elected Pandit woman as a *panchayat* member from *Wusan*, a village in north Kashmir where 98% electorate is of Muslims signaling a change in the relationship between Hindus and Muslims. The Pandits have also realized such changes as they are coming back into the Valley. Although it is not possible for generation next to return into the Valley as most of them are well settled outside the state and would not like to come back in the land of less opportunities and still groaning under turbulence. However, elder people would love to be in the Valley as its inhabitants for rest of life. Desh Rattan Pandita, National President of All Migrant Camps Co-ordination Committee, reported that 14,000 Kashmiri Pandits have filled up the forms giving consent to return to their native places in the Valley. Ali Mohammad Sagar, Minister of Rural Development Department in Jammu & Kashmir, also said that the time is not far when they would return and again start living in the same old tradition of mutual brotherhood and peaceful co-existence.

Conclusion

Thus it is clear from the above discussion that Pandits were a very important organ of the Kashmir, born in the Valley, cremate their ancestors here and spent most part of their lives. In fact, their culture is quite different from the Hindus in other parts of India, so they are finding themselves aliens outside the Valley. So it is not possible to find out permanent lasting solution of the Kashmir problem without taking into account the voice of the Kashmiri Muslims and the Kashmiri Pandits as a united but separate entity. Only on encouraging Hindu-Muslim reconciliation and return of the Kashmiri Pandits into a welcoming and safe environment would there be a growth towards such a future. Ram Jethmalani, Chairman of a four-

member team of Kashmir Committee, said that the Kashmir issue could be resolved only when displaced Pandits return to the Valley. Returning of Kashmiri Pandits to their homes would be the most essential milestone in the search for peace in Kashmir.

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