

Welfare of Residual Kashmiri Pandits Living in the Valley Today

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- The state of Kashmiri Pandits who never left the valley, and continued to live in Kashmir even during extreme periods of terrorist violence, is not good. In fact they are in a dire condition and looking at their faces one can see the last throes of a civilization that is fast sinking into oblivion.
- The problems of valley based Pandits differ in magnitude and severity from problems faced by internally displaced Pandits who migrated out of the valley during the height of insurgency. Yet, there is no institutional framework in place to address problems of valley Pandits, many of whom are also internally displaced from their ancestral homes and relocated to principal district headquarters within the valley.
- The attention of the State and Central governments, as well as the local civil society, has been focused on the welfare of displaced Pandits in various refugee camps outside of the valley. While there is a public commitment to see these displaced people return to the valley, yet no one is bothering to check the state of Pandits in the valley today. The Pandit population in the valley of nearly 350,000 before the insurgency shrank to 18,000 by 1997 (official count). It continues to dwindle and may be under 7,000 today. The rhetoric of “return with dignity” is a mere hollow slogan if State institutions – including political, administrative and legal systems – are unable and, even worse, uncaring to stop the outflow of Pandits from the valley today.
- A recent first-hand visit to Pandit families living in Srinagar, Budgam, Tral, Mattan, Pulwama and Baramulla, disclosed the following:
 - Valley Pandits are in a state of benign neglect and the present State government has made no effort to check on their welfare or helped them in any significant way. For example, job or educational opportunities for Pandits are open on the same rules and regulations as with normal applicants even though very few Pandits are left in the valley. Denied both the minority status as well as the benefit of special schemes to rehabilitate people affected by militancy, Kashmiri Pandits living in the valley today are victims of gross negligence on the part of the official government machinery.
 - There is a complete loss of composite cultural identity in the valley. In fact, most Pandit temples and religious sites are in a poor condition and the situation is further worsened by the sale of land belonging to Pandit religious sites by unscrupulous people (“trustees”) to various land mafias operating in the valley. All over the valley temple lands have been converted into shopping areas.
 - Various land mafias are also active in grabbing the land of Pandit farmers who are internally displaced and live in rented quarters at various district headquarters. The displaced Pandit land-owners are unable to assert their legal claim and title, as in the most cases, their

land was never legally demarcated in the past. Displaced Pandits are being robbed of their legitimate ownership to such lands for the lack of revenue records maintained by the State government.

- Valley Pandits are in a state of virtual isolation driven by their dwindling numbers. It has incapacitated them both mentally and physically. Many Pandits who have died in far-flung villages and hamlets are being cremated without proper last rites in the absence of any community presence. Government insensitivity has compounded the problem of cross-communication between Pandit clusters in various villages within the valley.
- The ambivalence that the State government has maintained towards displaced Pandits currently living outside of the valley can not apply to valley based Pandits who are living on a hand-to-foot basis with a bleak future. Whether it was the inter-ministerial team announced by the Prime Minister two years ago or the new “committee of four or five” proposed by the Chief Minister on 7th November 2006, all such initiatives have mainly focused on non-valley based Pandits. While one can argue that recommendations from such groups can also apply to valley based Pandits, the reality is that there will not be any Pandits left in the valley if the State government keeps only talking about a “comprehensive package for the return of Pandits” rather than helping valley Pandits immediately - “right now” – on a priority basis.
- The State government must pursue following actions on a priority basis:
 - The Chief Minister must designate a political appointee who will be the point-person for valley based Kashmiri Pandits. He should be accessible to valley Pandits on an urgent basis as some of the problems faced by valley Pandits are unique and sometimes require immediate decisions/actions to prevent tragedies faced in the past. Valley based Pandits, on their part, have also organized themselves under the Hindu Welfare Society Kashmir (HWSK), and elected Mr. Moti Lal Bhat, Principal of Lal Ded Girls School, Badiyar, Srinagar, as its President through a transparent election process. Mr. Bhat should have access to the State government contacts on a 24/7 basis.
 - The rehabilitation of displaced valley Pandits must be taken on an urgent basis as many of the dwelling owners where many displaced Pandits are living in the valley today have sought to evict them or are seeking increased rents that many cannot pay because of a lack of employment within most Pandit families.
 - Employment and educational opportunities for the few Pandit youth left in the valley today must be tackled on a priority basis and cannot be treated by the official State machinery as “business as usual.” Otherwise, these people will also leave the valley and the cost of upkeep of such people outside of the valley will be even higher.
 - The State government must make a vigorous effort to update revenue records of displaced Pandits so that their lands are properly

demarcated and their title to the land is protected from land mafia. All improper transactions must be nullified.

- **The State must take over temple management and ownership from mushrooming Hindu religious trusts in Kashmir that have sold temple properties for personal gains. All land sales executed by such temple trusts in the last 15 years must be nullified and the State should take over the ownership of such properties until a proper new collective mechanism for oversight and management of various temple properties is established.**
- **Finally, the few Pandits living in the valley today need a communication network to stay in touch with each other and to look after elderly community members who are in poor health or those who are dying. These Pandits chose a life of hardship and isolation by staying close to the land of their forefathers and today many of the left-over people are entering the twilight of their lives. It is only humane if they get their wish and die with dignity and grace in the land they love. The State government should establish a monitoring network that reports to the political appointee established by the chief minister.**

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Note on the status of Kashmiri Pandits still resident in Valley

I visited Srinagar on 21st June 2008 to chair the meeting of the Board of Governors of NIT and addressed the group of NGOs on the RTI Act. However, during this visit I also had occasion to meet with groups of Kashmiri Pandits who have stayed in the valley termed in this note for the sake of convenience non-migrant KPs. Having heard of certain difficulties faced by this community I had asked two or three of them to meet me. However three large groups, two of who belonging to two groups of the Hindu Welfare Society, Kashmir and the third from the Kashmiri Pandits Sangarash Samiti visited me.

My purpose in having invited some members of the erstwhile united Hindu Welfare Society, Kashmir to meet me was to persuade them, instead of splintering into several groups, to come together to place their requirements to the Government since, according to my information the community has been reduced to a mere 7000 persons resident inside the valley. For the government to address their problems it would in my view have been best for all concerned to present a consensus of requirements. Although there has been progress in the open exercise of their traditions like the restoration and now normalcy of the annual Janmashtami procession, on material issues that we describe real difficulties persist. However, as will be clear hereafter, the meeting, which lasted several hours separately with each group, was attended by the following:

- i) Hindu Welfare Society – Group I
 - 1. Shri A. K. Rajpuri (Rajpur, Pulwama), President.
 - 2. Shri Srinath Jee (Mattan).
 - 3. Shri Makhan Lal Zutshi (Talab, Pulwama).
 - 4. Shri Omkar Nath (Mattan, Ang).
 - 5. Shri Makhan Lal Tikoo (Talab, Pulwama).

6. Shri Roop Jee (Mattan).
7. Shri C. L. Bhat (Publicity Secretary).
8. Shri Suroj Wali.
9. Shri Surender Bhat.
10. Shri Bal Jee (Cashier).
11. Shri Vinod Bhat.
12. Shri B. N. Bhat (Gen Secretary).
13. Shri C. S. Saproo.

ii) Hindu Welfare Society – Group II

1. Shri M. L. Bhat, President.
2. Shri C. S. Sapru.
3. Shri Kanwal Ganjoo, Gen Secretary.
4. Shri B. L. Shah.
5. Shri Ashok Koul.
6. Shri Raj Nath.
7. Shri Moti Lal Pandit.
8. Shri M. K. Sadhu.
9. Shri Baskar Nath.
10. Shri A. K. Sadhu.
11. Shri K. L. Majoo.
12. Shri Kamlesh Warloo.
13. Shri K. K. Tiloo.
14. Shri M. L. Dhar.
15. Shri Ramesh Pandita.
16. Shri Virender Sangloo.
17. Shri P. L. Parmoo.

iii) Kashmiri Pandit Sangarash Samiti: Mr. Sanjay
Tikkoo & three others

In this context I attach a copy of a note of Shri Vijay Sazawal, prepared in December 2006 that was submitted to the Prime Minister. This, therefore, became the basis for discussion with three groups. The following is the list of areas where the community as a whole is facing difficulties:

- "A. A Census of the non-migrant KP community by age, gender and location has not thus far been made.
- B. There is no consolidated record of land and property records of the non-migrant KPs of "Munsif quality" that are fully detailed.

- C. A list of unemployed, underemployed and under educated KP's below the age of 25 who must be provided reasonably decent jobs by the State Government.
- D. I also understand there are about 150 families in outlying areas that live on charity and have no source for food other than charity kitchens at Mosques, etc. This needs to be investigated and the matter rectified. This was admitted in the meeting, but the number was put down as 55 families of whom 15 are in Srinagar

On `A' above there has been an interim census report prepared by the Kashmiri Pandit Sangarash Samiti, financed by members of the KP Diaspora, covering 62 mohallas of Anantnag, Bandipore, Baramulla, Budgam, Ganderbal, Kulgam, Kupwara, Pulwama, Shopian and Srinagar. On 'B' above there has also been a consolidated survey attempted by the Kashmiri Pandit Sangarash Samiti. They have been able to compile some information under the following heads:

- i. Consolidated statement of migrant property inventory in respect of residential houses.
- ii. Consolidated statement of migrant property inventory in respect of Kitchen structures.
- iii. Consolidated statement of migrant property inventory in respect of Shops.
- iv. Consolidated statement of migrant property inventory in respect of cow sheds.
- v. Consolidated statement of migrant property inventory in respect of kothars (Granaries).

- vi. Consolidated statement of migrant property inventory in respect of other sheds.
- vii. Consolidated statement of migrant property inventory in respect of migrant property inventory in respect of migrant property under the occupation of security forces.
- viii. Tehsil wise position of un-authorized occupation of migrant properties by private persons in presently reported to be as under.

However, the conclusions that they appear to have arrived at on the number of KP families still residing in the valley, although not final and subject to verification, is alarming. A copy of the statement, which may please be treated as Confidential for the time being is attached.

On 'B' above there is also some record of buildings occupied by the security forces, mainly houses for which owners are also receiving rent. However, the record of landed property is sketchy and will serve no legal purpose. There is, besides, no record of the properties attached to temples, with details of encroachments, and those leased out, or under occupation.

Question No. 'C' is of the deepest concern to the non-migrant KPs. The KPSS has come up with the figure of 213 unemployed youths. The Hindu Welfare Society Group A on the other hand has come up with a figure of 500. This is not an unduly cumbersome figure for potential employment in state services functioning in the Valley. However, it is, in my view, necessary to have a definite figure together with their qualifications because in matters of employment, particularly within the valley it is essential that the non-migrant KPs, who stayed back through every

vicissitude, be given priority in employment. On the other hand, recruitment on the basis of recommendation is prone to misuse.

On 'D' above the fact that there are such families still subsisting in Kashmir is alarming. The actual figures together with details of subsistence will require being determined and remedial action taken in a state that prides itself on its poverty line being the lowest in the country

On the basis of above the following is recommended:

I. The Revenue Department may take on priority survey on points 'A' and 'B' to be completed within a given time frame. For this purpose the work already done by some groups of Kashmiri Pandits can be made use of. They will be happy to provide the relevant copies to the appropriate authorities together with the basis for arriving at their conclusions.

II. On point 'C' it is already the practice that, depending on qualification, preference in recruitment is given to migrants in certain kinds of employment. It is recommended that the qualified non-migrant KPs be given priority with due allowance for the fact that because they have stayed on in the time of turmoil, many of them have not been able to fulfill their fullest potential in acquisition of degrees.

III. On 'D' above it is recommended that NGOs may be mobilised to ensure appropriate relief for such destitute families, who may be provided accommodation in the accommodation established for displaced KPs.

To further the above purpose it is recommended that the Chief Secretary Shri S.S. Kapur invite the following, to work as a working committee to oversee this exercise.



1. Avtar Krishan Rajpuri
2. Kanwal Ganjoo
3. Chandrasekhar Saproo
4. Sanjay Tikkoo
5. Motilal Bhat

The undersigned would be happy to assist if and whenever required

Wajahat Habibullah
July 7, 2008

Encl: As above



[Comment on Article](#)   [Back to Article Page](#)

Protecting Kashmiri Ethos by Preserving Pandit Identity in the Valley.

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10 February 2008

The "Vision Statement" emanating from a Roundtable discussion on preserving Kashmiri Pandit (KP) identity in the Kashmir valley. The meeting was organized by activists from KP community of Northern California to which the author was invited. The meeting took place in the San Jose Hindu Temple on February 10, 2008.

Agenda for the Kashmiri Pandit (KP) Diaspora 2008

Vision:

To affirm and commit our collective resolve for re-emergence of Pandit identity in the Kashmir valley and ensure that Kashmiri Pandits participate as a key constituent in the final resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

Goals:

The vision will be realized through a combination of cultural, economic and political revival of Kashmiri Pandits in the valley. It will take patience and time, but if the diaspora is supportive and not indifferent or skeptic, these goals can be achieved sooner.

Cultural Revival:

- Provide psychological, institutional and financial support to valley based Pandits in order to create a cultural critical mass in the valley that may accelerate the early return of interested state subjects back to Kashmir
- Establish a temple management authority run by Pandits that effectively protects, preserves and manages important Pandit temples, shrines and cultural sites*

Economic Revival:

- Seek official minority status for Kashmiri Pandits as a way to assure adequate representation in J&K's polity, including the State administration. This will require legislation to establish a State Minority Commission that should be empowered by the Legislative Assembly to implement recommendations of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)
- Strive for inclusion of the rehabilitation budget for Kashmiri Pandits in the J&K Annual Budget so that the State places a priority for re-integrating Pandits into Kashmir's economy, head count and workforce. Extend the "Roshni Bill of 2007" to include Pandit farmers and landholders who fled the valley in the 1990's*

Political Revival:

- Ensure that KP's are recognized as full-fledged party in the final resolution of the Kashmir issue. Create awareness among major foreign powers in this regard, and inform these governments about growing political, economic and cultural isolation faced by KP's today.
- Demand the restoration of a long-standing tradition in Jammu and Kashmir where at least one cabinet ministerial portfolio has been assigned to a Kashmiri Pandit*

(* near-term focus)

[Back to Article Page](#)