



**The author met with the Prime Minister of India at a special reception
in Washington, DC on 25th November 2009**

**On Dr. Manmohan Singh's left is wife, Mrs. Gursharan Kaur, and on his
right the Indian Ambassador, Mrs. Meera Shankar**



Indo-American Kashmir Forum

Vijay K. Sazawal, Ph.D.
International Coordinator
vks@KashmirForum.org

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The Honorable Dr. Manmohan Singh
Prime Minister of India
Republic of India
New Delhi

Dear Prime Minister,

Your visit to the United States is very historic and significant in many ways. Your personal contribution in lifting the impoverished citizens of the young democracy is unquestionable. You have, Sir, made a distinct impact on the people who were left behind by the system.

It is in this context I would like to bring to your kind attention the plight of Kashmiri Pandits who have been torn asunder since the rise of separatist insurgency in Kashmir in 1989-1990.

While the community remains grateful to you for the Rs. 1600 crore rehabilitation package, the ugly truth is that Pandits did not suffer from any havoc caused by natural calamities like an earthquake or a flood. They faced a man-made calamity called the ethnic cleansing. Even the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on June 11, 1999 declared that "Kashmiri Pandits were subjected to near-genocide conditions before they fled." So any rehabilitation package that does not address the core issue of shrinking political, economic and social space for Kashmiri Pandits in the valley is not only incomplete, but also totally inadequate in addressing basic needs of the community today.

The Government of Jammu and Kashmir, under the Chairmanship of Mr. Raman Bhalla, Minister of State for Revenue, constituted an "Apex Committee" comprising of 30-35 Kashmiri Pandits on 15 September 2009. The first meeting of the group was held on 23 September 2009 in Jammu, and the large number of participants and their diverse views necessitated a suggestion to create a Steering Committee which will discuss all matters regarding rehabilitation and return of Kashmiri Pandits to the Valley that have received the consent of the full Apex Committee. The second meeting of the Apex Committee was held on 4 November 2009 in Jammu with the Union Home Minister, Mr. P. Chidambaram, present. He assured Pandit representatives that they would be consulted on all issues related to their return and rehabilitation.

The key State officials involved in administering the rehabilitation program, besides Minister Bhalla, are: Minister of State for Revenue, Mr. Nasir Aslam Wani (Sogami), Revenue Secretary Eijaz Iqbal, and the Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner, Mr. Vinod Koul. While Mr. Sogami is a confidant of the State Chief Minister, the official State team lacks sufficient political depth to address issues that go beyond revenue and compensation matters. If the past track record is any indication, regional political parties within the J&K are unwilling to invest any political capital towards the betterment of Pandits living within the valley or those who were forced to flee and wish to return.

The Kashmiri Pandit community in general, and the Apex Committee in particular, has come to a general consensus that limiting the focus of community priorities to a small number of key and important issues is extremely important in order to make the discussion with State and Central governments bear positive results. So a list of Common Minimum Demands (CMD's) has been drafted, and indeed the presentation to the Home Minister primarily focused on these eight (8) demands. These are (in no particular order of priority):

- The Apex Committee should be consulted on all government initiatives before either the Central or State government proposes any legislative bill, or approves any executive or administrative order related to the rehabilitation and return of Kashmiri Pandits to the Valley.

14015 Hartley Hall Place, Darnestown, Maryland 20874



- The implementation of 6,000 jobs for Pandits and enhancement of cash relief to displaced families should take place within the next 6 months as a Confidence Building Measure (CBM) while long-term issues are being resolved.
- The financial and economic benefit package must extend to valley based Pandits (so called "non-migrants") who have received marginal assistance from the State government and the local civil society so far. The Pandit population in the valley continues to steadily decline, and reversing that trend should be one of the highest priorities.
- Political rights of the community, including representation in the State Cabinet, Legislative Assembly and the Indian Parliament must be guaranteed through changes in appropriate State and Union laws.
- Kashmiri Pandits must receive equal consideration as full-fledged constituents in the political dialogue that the Central government plans to hold with various Kashmiri entities.
- State Government must agree in principle to implement the recommendation of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) regarding granting minority status to Pandits.
- The State government must secure legislative approval of the Kashmiri Hindu Shrines and Religious Places (Management and Regulation) Bill, 2008, without further delay.
- The Central government must establish a Commission of Inquiry to examine what events led to forced exodus of Pandits in 1989-1990, and implement appropriate recommendations to prevent a similar calamity in the future.

While more demands can be added to this list, or even these eight (8) basic demands can be expressed in greater detail, the community has decided that it is best that the "core demands" be held to a minimum and be drafted in a manner that allows flexibility during negotiations with various political and official authorities.

It is hoped that the Prime Minister's personal interest and intervention will provide the necessary impetus to State's political and bureaucratic machinery to wake up from its slumber, and achieve measurable results in bringing Pandits back to their homeland. Building interim housing for displaced families cannot be, and should not be, deemed as a milestone towards that goal. As the CMD's indicate, there is considerable work needed to open up political, economic and social space in the valley before it makes sense for Pandits to return to the valley.

I am requesting you to please use your personal authority to make the future as meaningful to Kashmiri Pandits as you have done for many disfranchised communities all over in India. Thank you.

With my highest regards,

Respectfully,

Vijay K. Sazawal, Ph.D.
International Coordinator
Indo-American Kashmir Forum, Washington
Indo-Canadian Kashmir Forum, Ottawa
Indo-European Kashmir Forum, London and Geneva

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