

Ethnic Cleansing in the Paradise of Earth: A Study of “Our Moon Has Blood Clots” by Rahul Pandita

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ABSTRACT

The word ‘ethnic cleansing’ means a systematic and forced removal of certain ethnic or religious group by a more powerful ethnic or religious group, often resulting in making a certain area homogenous and practicing same religion. Most Kashmiri Pandits living in the Kashmir Valley left in 1990 as aggressor viciousness inundated the state. Some 95% of the 160,000-170,000 networks left in what is regularly depicted as an instance of ethnic purifying. For what reason did they leave? What political developments have followed? A large part of the current spotlight is on the individuals who have left Kashmir. The current paper attempts to investigate the injury of Kashmiri Pandit, who were dislodged from Kashmir valley during the political disturbance of 1990's, as depicted in Rahul Pandita's wonderfully composed memoir *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, deploring the deficiency of home, the story of the book is in first person, and the writer consistently portrays the encounters of his own just as his family pre 1990's and post 1990's. Chaotic panic was widespread. Fear and fright loomed large. Humanity was being hijacked while the confusion was confounded. Kashmiri Pandits and those Kashmiri Muslims who supported their Pandit brethren were running for their lives. Loud pro- Islam and anti-Hindu slogans were raised collectively by a multitude of humanity and relayed through powerful loudspeakers almost piercing the ear drums. These outbursts were not new to the Pandits in their homeland as they were accustomed to these shout outs at odd hours with tumultuous bangs and threats that were brewing in the valley of Kashmir. This was the starting of ‘ethnic cleansing’ from the Valley of Kashmir.

KEYWORDS: Kashmir, Ethnic Cleansing, Kashmiri Pandit, Kashmiriyat, Exile, Trauma, Violence, Homelessness

INTRODUCTION

“From March 1990 onwards, the killings of Pandits in the Valley increased manifold. The news reports coming in from Kashmir were tragic. In the name of Azadi, the Pandits were hounded on the streets and killed brutally. Killings of the Hindu minority had turned into an orgy; a kind of bloodlust.”

- *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*

The National Bestseller “*Our Moon Has Blood Clots*” throws a sharp new light onto one of the most tragic chapter of India. Replete with actual happenings of Kashmir, Rahul Pandita share his lived experiences of those turbulent years through his works. Rahul Pandita belongs to a family of Kashmiri Pandits who fled the valley in 1990 amidst political turmoil. This fleeing of Pandits has been described through various terms-exodus, displacement, ethnic cleansing and migration.

Rahul Pandita says that he and his family were forced into exile, first from the valley to Jammu and subsequently to Delhi. Like the other displaced, they became unsettled, unable to find out why they had been targeted, not just by “armed terrorists who took pride in killings” (Pandita 115) but by “the common man on the street [who] participated in some of these heinous murders as well” (Pandita 115). It implies that Kashmiriyat, the idea of religious syncretism and co-existence, could not survive in these violent circumstances. The concept of co-existence fell

weak when it was needed the most. The dominant Kashmiri discourse is silent about the failure of Kashmiriyat in the years of insurgency when the trust between the two communities died.

The memoir brings out life in poor and inadequate refugee camps and rented accommodation in Jammu, with insufficient money and no jobs: “[There was] no money and there was total uncertainty about our future” (Pandita 99). The children lost access to schools, and the Pandits were treated as fair game by all those who could profit from their helplessness. Delineating the conditions of Kashmiri Pandits in the camps, Pandita writes: “It was a pathetic existence. Many fell ill with diseases that were hitherto unknown to the community. In the first year alone, many elderly people died of sunstroke, and snake and scorpion bites. Children became infected with fungal disease, and scabies became rampant in the unhygienic camps. Doctors reported hundreds of cases of stress induced diabetes. Heart disease and hypertension made their way in our lives. Many fell into depression. There were severe privacy issues as well. Young couples were forced to live in small enclosures with parents. (Pandita 130)”

The lives of Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu were reduced to a space, which was neither inside nor outside. They were

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inside, their state and their country but they were treated like outsiders. The binary distinction of inside/outside failed in this situation as the Pandits were abandoned in their own country. It was like living in a "zone of indistinction", to use Giorgio Agamben's words (qtd. in Downey 110). They lived in uncertainty with no assurance and help coming from any side. To live in a refugee camp was like living on the margins socially, culturally, economically and politically. The whole community was cut off from its cultural roots and these rootless people faced economic challenges and lived in a "limbo-like state" (Downey 109). The life of the entire community was "exposed to death" (Downey 112) in the refugee camps and denied resources to live a proper life. It is important to question the failure of law and order in the valley which was reflected in the absence of any kind of effort to prevent the mass exodus of the Pandits and their geographical marginalization.

The book starts on a very emotional note in the following manner, "They found the old man dead in his torn tent, with a pack of chilled milk pressed against his right cheek. It was our first June in exile..." (Pandita 1), this is how the tale of death, destruction and displacement is narrated by Rahul Pandita. The author writes about his experiences in Srinagar, in Jammu and in Delhi. In Srinagar he talks about pre and post 1990's, in 1990's Kashmir was echoed by the slogans of Azadi, by anti-Indian slogans, and the sound of guns and grenades, it was because of the militant uprising in 1989 which forced Pandits to leave the valley, but here one thing must be remembered that there are two dimensional narrative about the exile of the Kashmiri Pandits one is according to Kashmiri Muslims who believe that Pandits were made to leave the valley under a government's design to discredit the Kashmiri Separatist movement, and the other is that after the exile of Pandits Jagmohan could deal with Muslims of the valley firmly. And according to Pandit community it was because of the Kashmiri militants who are responsible for their exodus.

The book is a tragic tale of an individual, of a family and a community. The writer most of the times compares his present condition i.e. homelessness with that of his good days in Srinagar, in Jammu living in a rented room Rahul Pandita says, "it was barely a room. Until a few months ago, it had been a cowshed" shows the pathetic condition of life in exile. The author shows how difficult it is to leave one's home, one's homeland and one's relative, narrator once said, "In constructing the house, my father had exhausted his entire Provident Fund; whatever little jewelry my mother possessed was also sold to help finance the construction" (Pandita 21).

The author and his family is so much nostalgic that after having their own two room flat in Delhi, they are not satisfied and feel that they do lack something, "that is the habit my father's generation has: calling Srinagar 'Shahar'- the city that is home. And when I gently remind father of his mistake, he smiles an embarrassed smile...I can only imagine what images the mere mention of Shahar evokes in him. Shahar was our home. Shahar was our shahrag- our jugular. Shahar was us" (Pandita 33-34) After being exiled from Kashmir, Rahul Pandita has migrated to Jammu, then to Chandigarh and finally to Delhi, but nowhere has he found the peace and solace which he has at his ancestral home i.e. Srinagar. The writer writes, "We have been in exile for more

than two decades. Kashmir is a memory, an overdose of nostalgia. But beyond this, there is nothing."

Kashmiri Pandits felt marginalized not only in the valley but also in Jammu. Both regional and religious affiliations failed them and it led to an identity crisis in the community. In the valley, they were treated as agents of the Indian state and in Jammu their roots in the valley overshadowed their Indianness. They were relegated to a space which was devoid of any kind of political representation. Pandita describes his exile as a "permanent exile" with no hope of return. On celebrations and mournings, the other migrants could go back to their real home but he could not do that. He could own a house anywhere else in the world, "but not in Kashmir valley where his family came from" (Pandita 7). The eternal sense of homelessness brings with it a never ending search for identity. The identity will always yearn for the fragments which were left behind in the valley. Pandita has also reacted to the stance of media and intellectuals on the Kashmir problem. He feels that the story of his community has been marginalized and only Kashmiri Muslims are shown as victims: "Another problem is the apathy of the media and a majority of India's intellectual class who refuse to even acknowledge the suffering of the Pandits. No campaigns were ever run for us; no fellowship or grants given for research on exodus. For the media, the Kashmir issue has remained largely black and white- here are people who were victims of brutalization at the hands of the Indian state. But the media has failed to see, and has largely ignored the fact that the same people also victimized another people. (Pandita 220)"

Pandits find themselves absent from every discourse about Kashmir. There are certain media reports that support the dominant Kashmiri discourse by "raising concern about the various human rights violations in the valley. But these reports have not discussed the presence of religious tension which' was somewhere, along with other factors, responsible for the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. From reports about Kashmiri Muslims getting antis training in Pakistan to the reports about their victimhood, the media has always kept them at the centre. As an agent of violence or as a victim of violence, Kashmiri Muslims have always been under the gaze of the media. Additionally, the "other story" of Kashmiri Pandits was rarely covered by the media.

According to the memoir, many in Kashmir clearly resented the return of the Pandit employees under the package of the Government. The distance between the two communities has widened. The communal fissure is not the only reason that can explain this resentment because now there is an economic aspect attached to the whole problem. The return of the Pandits in the valley for jobs has created economic insecurity in the Kashmiri Muslims.

At a certain point I lost track of you.
You needed me. You needed to perfect me:
In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
Your history gets in the way of my memory.
I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.
Your memory gets in the way of my memory...(Ali 4)

The poem "Farewell" by Agha Shahid Ali is replete with unbearable pain and estrangement which was created between the two communities, Kashmiri Pandits and

Kashmiri Muslims after the exile of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland, Kashmir. This poem is a letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit friend narrating the horrible event of 1990 which epitomizes the sufferings of Kashmiri Pandit brethren. As a result, they were forced to flee their homeland, their valley and move to someplace else which was a strange land to them. This poem discusses the loss of culture, loss of values and most importantly loss of relationships which were once celebrated between the two communities. However, the bond which brought them together before the conflict started was brotherhood which Kashmiris called Kashmiriyat. Kashmiriyat represented the peaceful bondage between the Kashmiri Pandits and the Kashmiri Muslims. For Kashmiris, it was their life. There was this love and respect towards each other and they never discriminated between the Pandits and Muslims. They were considered as one. But this loving and peaceful bond was soon brought to an end when there was an outbreak of militancy. A few Kashmiri Muslims willingly joined the hands with the militants after they were brain-washed against the Pandits and many were forced to join as they were given just limited choices, either join or die. This absence of Kashmiri Muslims from the lives of their Pandit brethren is heartening and the question which arises is whether they will share the same camaraderie in near future or not?

“Our Moon Has Blood Clots” is divided into five parts that chronicles a poignant tale of both the period and its events. The book was shortlisted for The Crossword Book Award, 2013. “The book cannot be ignored. It is powerful, painful – and revealing” writes Hindustan Times (Jacket). In his interview, Rahul Pandita talks about his book as: “My book is called Our Moon Has Blood Clots. And it’s a memoir on growing up in Kashmir as a religious minority, essentially, Kashmiri Hindus, also known as Kashmiri Pandits—a small, miniscule community that lived in Kashmir for hundreds of years and were forced into permanent exile as refugees in their own country in 1989-90, when an Islamist movement broke out in Kashmir Valley.” (Forbes India)

History says that in Kashmir the Pandits have a long tradition of more than 11000 years. Then Kashmir was a seat of culture, civilization, knowledge and spirituality. But by 14th century the prosperity and splendor of Kashmir life started declining on account the corrupted Lohara dynasty and Turkish invasion. Later many Afgan and Mugal rulers wrecked havoc in Kashmir. They tortured the non-Muslims there and most of them were forced to convert to Islam and the rest including Pandits migrated to other parts of India. As a result, says Gangoo, “Kashmir valley became a predominantly Muslim region”.

Kashmir was a land blessed with nature’s bounty, remembers Rahul. In all sense it was a heaven on earth. Rahul believes it is the magnificent nature which made his ancestors pursue knowledge. Their pursuit of knowledge turned the valley to an abode of wisdom. The scholastic as well as the artistic excellence of the Pandits got transferred from generation to generation. They were the representatives of glorious heritage and legacy of Kashmir. Such a well rooted community, when ordered by the militants to flee from their homeland as a part of ethnic cleansing, is left traumatized: I was one of the thousands of migrants who landed each day at the door step of India’s capital from every crevice and corner of the country [...] But

there was a difference between the other migrants and me. On the festivals and on family functions, or when they were dying they knew they could go back to where they had come from. I couldn’t do that I knew I was in permanent exile. (Pandita 6) Yes, ‘permanent exile’, that is what haunts Rahul throughout his life. Like any other Kashmiri Pandit, who is forced to leave their homeland, Rahul also finds this reality horrible. The easy luxurious metropolitan life in Delhi never offers him comfort. On the other hand Kashmir always allures him as his final destination. The intensity of trauma that Rahul experiences is fully realized when he hopelessly and helplessly describes himself as a migrant in his own country.

Lets have a look from the historical perspective about Kashmiri Pandit. "As the night fell, the microscopic community became panic-stricken when the Valley began reverberating with the war-cries of Islamists, who had stage-managed the whole event with great care; choosing its timing and the slogans to be used. A host of highly provocative, communal and threatening slogans, interspersed with martial songs, incited the Muslims to come out on the streets and break the chains of 'slavery'. These exhortations urged the faithful to give a final push to the Kafir in order to ring in the true Islamic order. These slogans were mixed with precise and unambiguous threats to Pandits. They were presented with three choices - Ralive, Tsaliv ya Galive (convert to Islam, leave the place or perish). Tens of thousands of Kashmiri Muslims poured into the streets of the Valley, shouting 'death to India' and death to Kafir.

Conclusion:

The exile and exodus of Kashmiri pundits’ stories, the trauma of loss of home, hitherto unrecognised in India, needed to be told and to be heard. The exodus and exile of half-a million Kashmiri Pundits from the Kashmir valley has become just a subplot in the chequered history of the land. Twenty-nine years since January 19, 1990, when thousands of Kashmiri Pundits started leaving their homes fearing persecution and death amid anti-India and anti-Pundit threats and this subplot gets dimmer. Their ancestral orchards and homes lie abandoned, while they live in misery in rehabilitation camps in Jammu, or have relocated to the hot plains of the other states of India, trying to eke out a living even as they dream of their lost homeland. Now, in the present scenario of administrative advancement concerning Kashmir those Kashmiri Pundits can become permanent resident of Kashmir is true. But this is not enough. The people of Kashmir who have been living there permanently must welcome the Kashmiri Pundits joyfully and cooperate with them as much as possible. The Government of India should supervise the whole process of rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pundits and cooperate with them fully. Only then it is possible to recover the traumatic loss of Home , of their own people, of their ethnicity, of the values of Insaniyat, of the quintessential element of Paradise.

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