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Memories of Home and Persecution: A Study of Recent Kashmiri Pandit Narratives

SOMJYOTI MRIDHA*

Abstract

This paper primarily engages with Kashmir Pandit narratives that have transpired after the community was evicted from the Kashmir Valley in the 1990's. The outbreak of armed struggle for Azadi in Kashmir in the 1990's led to the complete breakdown of the social fabric of Kashmir. Indiscriminate attacks on prominent Kashmiri Pandits and creation of a general atmosphere of fear and intimidation finally forced the Pandits to leave the valley. Based on select narratives exploring the themes of identity, belonging and exile of the Kashmiri Pandits, this paper proposes to examine the politics of these narratives in the context of the Hindu fundamentalist discourses among the Kashmiri Pandits.

Keywords: Kashmiri Pandit, Exile, Homelessness, Communalism, Violence, Minority.

Your history gets in the way of my memory
I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.
I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.
Your memory gets in the way of my memory

—Agha Shahid Ali

They had to live through this every day. Because we did not share sadness beyond this. Because then the topic always veered towards the events of 1989-90, and that was the point at which our truths became different. For them, the events of 1990 were a rebellion against the Indian state. For me, these same events had led to exile and permanent homelessness.

—Rahul Pandita.

*Somjyoti Mridha is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

These two quotations aptly reflect the ambivalent political situation in Kashmir valley in the aftermath of the armed struggle since 1989. The history and memory of the majority community of Kashmiri Muslims and the minority yet influential Pandit community bifurcates at this crucial juncture when the Pandits were forcibly evicted from the valley and became refugees in their own country. This paper shall be focusing on Pandit narratives like *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* by Rahul Pandita, *The Garden of Solitude* by Siddhartha Gigoo, *The Tiger Ladies* by Sudha Koul and a few others, dealing with their persecution and explore the poetics and the politics of the narratives. Some narratives like that of Koul's *Tiger Ladies* and Pandita's *Our Moon has Blood Clots* belong to the genre of memoirs while Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* and Nitasha Kauls's *Residue* are novels. Pandit narratives published after their exodus from the Kashmir valley not only describe the socio-cultural consequences of exile on the members of the community but also ideologically condition their experience of persecution and eviction from the valley.

The Pandit community has always been a miniscule minority in Kashmir valley and has always been at the mercy of their rulers. Although the primary focus of all these narratives remains the political situation prior to their exodus in 1990 and their subsequent experience as an exiled community in different parts of the country, the Pandit narratives are also replete with the history of persecution in different historical epochs. The memories of persecution almost always at the hands of their Muslim rulers from outside the valley in the distant past and their own Kashmiri brethren in the recent past seem to bind the Pandit community into a close-knit political entity. The memoirs and fictional rendering of their experience is intended to seek justice from the central government of India and non-Kashmiri Indian citizens. In contrast, the Kashmiri Muslim authors like Basharat Peer and Waheed Mirza and others primarily focus on the Indian military atrocities since 1990's. Yet authors belonging to both the communities employ similar kind of 'poetics of dispossession', a term borrowed from Anaya Jahanara Kabir. There is a characteristic similarity between anti-Azadi narratives of Kashmiri Pandits and pro-Azadi narratives mostly written by Kashmiri Muslims in terms of their idioms, metaphors and politics.

Popular perceptions, especially espoused and disseminated by Indian National Congress and key national leaders like Nehru and Gandhi, visualized Kashmir as the secular heaven free from communal strife that rages in other parts of India. While Congress has its own political agenda to portray Kashmir

as a secular heaven, the discourse of Kashmiriyat, where every Kashmiri irrespective of religion were bound by their affiliation to their homeland was propounded and valorized by Sheikh Abdullah in order to legitimize his ascendancy as the most prominent Kashmiri leader. Irrespective of its politically expedient use by both the Congress at the national level and Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference at the regional level, the discourse of Kashmiriyat did contribute a great deal towards a harmonious co-existence of Pandits, Muslims and Sikhs in the Kashmir valley. History of pre-insurgency Kashmir Valley records a few minor communal skirmishes between the Kashmiri Muslims and the Pandit community¹, where the Pandit community, although socially and financially privileged, were at the receiving end due to demographic disadvantage. Yet one can say that communal relations in the Kashmir valley was comparatively better than other parts of the Indian nation state which can be validated by the absence of any major communal clashes till the onset of the armed struggle in 1989 when the situation rapidly deteriorated. The efficacy of the discourse of Kashmiriyat is however challenged by many Pandit and pro-Pandit scholars in recent times, for instance, Chitrlekha Zutshi, in her book *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and The Making of Kashmir* has categorically debunked the notion of Kashmiriyat as a political discourse. In fact, she repeatedly stresses the fact that Sheikh Abdullah's ascendancy was primarily because of his unabashed espousal of Muslim economic interests and successful negotiation for the same with the Dogra state. According to Zutshi:

the narrative on Kashmiriyat ignores the contradiction that forms the substance of the Kashmiri nationalist movement: this movement which supposedly rescued Kashmiriyat from the jaws of the Dogra regime, based its demand squarely on the socio-economic distinctions between the two main religious communities in Kashmir, Pandits and Muslims (Zutshi 47).

The Pandit community's sense of persecution is aggravated by their demographic disadvantage as well as by the erosion of privileges that came by as co-religionists of the Dogra kings. During the Dogra regime, the Pandit community was treated preferentially in all aspects of public life. They were hand in glove with exploitative state machinery. Since the dawn of independence in 1947, the Dogra regime was dismantled and there was a gradual erosion of all the privileges enjoyed by the Pandits. The imperatives of democratic institutions in independent India led to complete overhaul of the system where the Kashmiri Muslims reaped the benefits in proportion to their demographic distribution.

Most of the Pandit narratives tend to interpret their loss of privilege as discrimination against them which in turn contribute to their sense of persecution. The gradual erosion of Pandit dominance in the valley after independence is beautifully expressed by Sudha Koul, “Relieved of the feudal trappings of our monarchy, we resume our lives in our new worlds with some significant changes. Muslims came into prominence everywhere, rapidly gaining control of jobs in proportion to their vast numbers in Kashmir” (Koul 31). Even Dhar complains of educated Muslims getting preferential treatment in appointments for government jobs. While delineating events during the late eighties Koul voices the insecurity of the Pandits,

We are becoming increasingly despondent. All of a sudden we feel we are too few, far too outnumbered, and far too vulnerable. Our lives and dignity have become imperiled in our own homeland. The Indian government is the sworn enemy of the mujahideen primarily because India is a Hindu country. Being Hindus we are suspect in the eyes of the rebels, who are now calling the shots literally and figuratively in Kashmir. The mujahideen only want Muslims in the valley (Koul 141).

One of the major thematic concerns of all the Pandit narrative is the loss of home. In fact the loss of home metonymically symbolizes the loss of the homeland since the Pandits had to flee their homeland. The Pandit home has been portrayed as a site of cultural and religious activity—a sanctified space of intimacy and intellectual engagements. There is a reiterated reference to the presence of books in and around the house which symbolize the intellectual achievement of the Pandit community. The onset of the conflict violates this sanctified space. The community is forced into exile where they labour hard to eke out a precarious existence in alien surroundings and culture. Rahul Pandita’s narrative evokes pathos since the protagonist’s mother, now languishing in extreme penury living inside a makeshift tenement in Jammu, repeatedly states the fact that they owned a spacious house with twenty two rooms in the past. The trauma of losing one’s home has also been dealt with in the Koul’s narrative where she tries to recreate a certain semblance of a Kashmiri Pandit home in US.

It is lovely sight to see the multicoloured versions of Vishnu the Preserver flitting about in the front garden, on the blood red impatiens flowering amid deep green foliage, and in this universal moment I forget where I am. What is missing in my re-created world is what makes it different, the snowline and the mountains, all the relatives and the laughter and the coming and the going (Koul 203).

One of the key features of Pandit narratives is to posit the Kashmiri Muslims not only as the ‘Other’ but also as the enemy of the Hindu community. The armed conflict since 1989 widened the gulf between the communities further but even earlier the notion of Muslims as the enemy appears to be very much a part and parcel of Pandit psyche. In an episode in *The Garden of Solitude*, Gigoo describes a Pandit saying, “Pandits were living on borrowed time. This had to happen one day. There was no trust between the Pandits and the Muslims; only pretence. Exile has been our destiny...” (Gigoo 89). Dhar’s novel exposes an almost rabid Islamophobia which is more or less the case with all the Pandit narratives barring Sudha Koul’s *The Tiger Ladies* and Nitasha Kaul’s *Residue*. This trait of Islamophobia is validated not only in reference to the recent conflict in Kashmir and their subsequent victimization of the Pandits but also while referring to the historical epochs where tyrannical conquerors, who incidentally were mostly Muslims, victimized the Pandits on account of their religion. The Pandits were victimized and targeted during the early nineties primarily because the pro-Azaadi groups deemed them as potential threat to their cause and as collaborators of the India state on account of their religion. Yet the ideological positioning of every Muslim as an enemy of the community definitely exposes a certain kind of communalism. In fact there are a variety of political perspectives within the Kashmiri Muslim community—some want Kashmir to merge with Pakistan, some others aspiring for independence and also many who want Kashmir to stay with India. Recent incidents since 1989 shows characteristic hostility towards the Pandits from the first two categories of Kashmiri Muslims, but the section of Kashmiri Muslim society which wants status-quo is definitely not so hostile to the Pandits. To portray all the Kashmiri Muslims as anti-Pandit apart from a few personal friends is a sweeping generalization and exposes communal sentiments of the authors. The problem lies in looking only at their religious identity and identifying all Kashmiri Muslims as pro-Azaadi and hence anti-Pandit. To put in the words of Amartya Sen, this singular affiliation disregards,

intricacies of plural groups and multiple loyalties [which] are obliterated by seeing each person as firmly embedded in exactly one affiliation...The incitement to ignore all affiliation and loyalties other than those emanating from one restrictive identity can be deeply delusive and also contribute to social tension and violence (Sen 21).

This kind of generalization disregards the severe critique of militancy from the Indian Muslim community such as bureaucrats like Wajahat

Habibullah and journalists like M.J. Akbar as well as the Pandits who provide unflinching support for Azaadi in Kashmir such as Sanjay Kak and the eminent Kashmiri scholar of yore, Prem Nath Bazaz.²

Most of the recently published Pandit narratives stresses on the memories of persecution by tyrannical rulers like Sultan Sikandar, the Afghans and others. The recently published Pandit narratives like *Our Moon has Blood Clots* and *The Garden of Solitude* also refer to communal skirmishes directed against the Pandits since the days of Dogra rule. The memory of persecution almost remains a constant refrain in Koul's narrative. She writes,

Having given us the most beautiful place in the world to live in God has evened the score by alternately subjecting us to serfdom and embattlement with the forces of nature on a regular basis. Our history has been under the joint custody of oppressive rulers and an earthly trinity of earthquakes, famines and floods (Koul 18).

Pandita begins his narration with a detailed history of the persecution of the Pandits. He refers to six instances in history when the Pandits either migrated in order to save their lives or was forcibly evicted from the valley in circumstances somewhat similar to the 1990's³³. Gigoo employs the memories of persecution very evocatively. The protagonist Sridhar says, "If we return, will it be forever this time or to migrate again in some years? One migration after another; there must be an end to this cycle. Let this be the last migration. Let us find new roots elsewhere" (Gigoo 126). There are numerous instances of persecution of the Hindus in various parts of the sub-continent during the medieval ages but the politically expedient use of these memories by equating them with the recent eviction of the community from the valley is very crucial and speaks volumes about the communal nature of the narrative. Gowhar Fazili's review of *Our Moon has Blood Clots* titled as "Our memories come in the way of our histories" states,

the book presents Pandits as politically benign throughout history, while the period post the arrival of Muslims on the scene is spoken of as 'Islamisation', implicitly as though Islam were something essentially vile. It does violence to the community, its intellect and will to presume that they were mostly converted forcibly by the invaders...Such exclusivist reading of history in Kashmir makes for Hindutva-like historiography. Communal historical narratives do persist in the privacy of our homes but any scholarship worth its salt should seek to challenge such naïve accounts of self (Source Kafila blog).⁴

Rahul Pandita's memoir is crucial in understanding the inherent communal bias in the memories of persecution. While he is full of praise for the Hindu rulers of Kashmir like Lalitaditya and Avantivarman, Kashmiri history seems to enter a troubled state only with the advent of Islam in the valley. He devotes a significant portion while describing the ordeals of the Pandits during the Afghan rule while the maltreatment of the Muslims subjects during the Sikhs and Dogra rule is mentioned in a single sentence. In fact the Pandit community got enormous privileges during the Dogra rule since they were the co-religionists of the king and became the oppressors of the Muslim Kashmiris under the tutelage of the Dogra state machinery. The silence about the Sikh and Dogra oppression is very crucial in the context of the relationship between the Pandits and Muslims in Kashmiri society. It is also crucial in the way collective memory resorts to selective appropriation of historical facts and events for record and projection. What is even more crucial is the endorsement of such community centric history/memory by the agents of state authority. Especially if the person endorsing such a communal history is an official like Jagmohan, the controversial Governor of Kashmir during the initial days of armed conflict in Kashmir, then it should be viewed with much skepticism. Having failed to safeguard the Pandit community from the onslaught of the pro-Azaadi militants during the volatile period of 1989-90 which ultimately made them refugees in their homeland, the state representative takes to the politically ambivalent move of recognizing the Pandit version of communal history. Such contradictory moves by state representative speak volumes about the Indian nation state's symbolic patronization and apathy towards the predicament of the Pandit community. It also showcases their antipathy towards the Kashmiri Muslims' fight for self-determination. The patronizing tone of Jagmohan is evident in his description of the Pandits,

Ever since I saw the plight of the Kashmiri pandit community from close quarters in February 1986, I have been pondering over its curious fate. It is a community whose history generates envy at their achievements as well as sorrow at their plight...its long history has been one of triumphs and tragedies—steady and silent triumphs and tumultuous and terrible tragedies. (Jagmohan 497-98)

The discourse of dispossession and persecution of the Pandits at the hands of their religious other makes them convenient target of the Hindu right wing outfits like the RSS and VHP. Unfortunately, these are the only political outfits who voice their anguish and predicament as a persecuted community while the comparatively progressive and secular political

organizations like the Communists and Congress always downplayed the role of religion in any aspect of Indian life interpreted the persecution of the Pandits in a very different manner. Ironically, to them the persecution of the Pandits is a minor issue and burns at the altar of their professed secularism. The fact that the situation in Kashmir represented the exact antithesis of mainland India with a majority Hindu population marginalizing a minority Muslim population is often ignored. Ananya Jahanara Kabir has rightly pointed out in her book, *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*:

in the context of south Asia, interlocked subjectivities and histories all too often mean that this re-affirmation of one community is conducted at the expense of designating an “other”. This interlocking is most acutely manifested in Kashmir, where the demographic relationship of “Hindu majority” and “Muslim minority” within postcolonial India stands reversed (Kabir 172).

The communists are severely critiqued by writers like Tej N Dhar and Rahul Pandita. Without mincing words, Dhar writes in *Under the Shadow of Militancy*, “Our Communist friends in New Delhi explain it in purely secular terms. It is no religious war, they say; it is the down trodden rising up against the classes which have been dominating the entire population of the Muslims” (Dhar 97). Pandita points out the petulance of Rajiv Gandhi about meaningless protocol when he arrived at Srinagar during the political and social crisis in Kashmir. When Kashmiri Pandits were threatened out of their homes, politicians were busy with petty politics. Yet, proximity to Hindu right has its seamier side as well. Pandita deals with this aspect in his narration where a group of RSS activists are engaged in hate-mongering among the innocent Pandit youths. As victims of one form of communalism they are being ideologically ingrained into the ruinous communal politics, “We are from the RSS. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. We will give direction to your anger,” (Pandita 103). The homeless Pandits demand for Panun Kashmir, which literally means our own Kashmir in Kashmiri, for creating a Pandit homeland within Kashmir by evicting the Muslims residing in those parts of Kashmir, is almost fascist in nature. It is the natural outcome of the Pandits’ dalliance with Hindu right wing parties and organizations.

The Pandit narratives are very crucial since they voice the Pandit version of Kashmir conflict. They portray and record the atrocities perpetrated against the Pandit community which were significantly absent

from the other writings transpiring in the aftermath of the conflict which makes them crucial with respect to politics of representation. Yet, we should be ever weary of the selective appropriation of historical facts and events exposing the subterranean discourse of communalism inherent in them.

Notes

¹ The year 1931 is crucial in the context of the history of Kashmir since it marks the onset of Kashmir's struggle for independence from the Dogra regime. While the primary target of the struggle was the Dogra state machinery, there were few instances of attacks against the Pandit community and their property. The Pandit community as the co-religionists of the Dogra ruler was the local representatives of the Dogra state in the valley. But many Pandits were also involved in the struggle against the Dogra state unlike the current situation where the Pandit community is totally alienated in the struggle against the Indian nation-state.

² Sanjay Kak's documentary titled *Jashn-e-Azaadi* was the first of its kind and vehemently critiques the atrocities of the Indian military establishment and supports freedom for Kashmir. Prem Nath Bazaz wrote books in favour of an independent Kashmir long before the armed struggle gave voice to Kashmiri nationalist struggle.

³ There is a controversy regarding the recent Pandit migration from the valley. The Pandits were definitely victimized and terrorized by the insurgents during the initial phase of armed conflict yet there is a theory that the then Governor of Kashmir, Jagmohan induced the Pandits to flee Kashmir valley. Although it seems unlikely that a government representative will initiate the process of mass migration of a particular community from one part of the country to another but it can be definitely said that Jagmohan facilitated their travel from Srinagar to Jammu. In his own accounts of the Kashmir events, *My Frozen Turbulence in Kashmir*, he speaks of his desperation to help the hapless Pandits who were being threatened out of their homes.

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