

Kashmiri Pundits: A Search for Identity or Identity Crisis with Special Reference to “Our Moon Has Blood Clots” by Rahul Pandita and “A Long Dream of Home” by Siddhartha Gigoo

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Abstract— *The nineties witnessed the mass exile of the Kashmiri Hindu Pundit community and Kashmir has virtually become this in-between debatable space, a no-man's land caught between the two-statist ideologies. Since then both the Kashmiris and Kashmiri pundits are in search for their identities. As Identity is the birthright of an individual. Everyone is born into this world with an identity or with multiple identities. Identity is also formed in due course of time. Hence, identity is both inherited and acquired. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize people's identity and allow them to preserve their distinct ethnic identity. Thus, this paper would analyze some of the factors leading to identity crisis and propose suggestions to resolve identity crisis among Kashmiries in general and in Kashmiri Pundits in particular. The paper will also analyse the Kashmir Conflict and exodus of pundits and its aftermath.*

Keywords— *Identity, Kashmiri Pundits, Identity Crisis, Kashmir Conflict.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is the birthright of an individual. Everyone is born into this world with an identity or with manifold identities. Identity is also formed in due course of time. Hence, identity is both born and acquired. Therefore, it is imperative to identify people's identity and allow them to protect their discrete, racial, cultural identity. It is good and sensible to have identity without which one is considered to be weak. We may also possess more than one identity like a national identity, religious identity, cultural identity, professional identity etc. However our identity based on gender, ethnic and national are more stable than other identities like religious, professional etc (Demmers, 2012). Identity is a symbolic construction, an image of ourselves, which we build in a process of interaction with others. If we do not compare ourselves with others there is no need for an identity. It is therefore contextual and dynamic, developing through dialogue and through the different ways in which people interact with others in relation to their cultural environment and their

relations (Mach, 2007). Identity is the creation of oneself, not placed on someone by another person, organization, or society. Identity moves from the local to the transnational. Identity is situational. Individual possess a core identity, but one's ethnic identity can shift depending on the environment and the relationships with others within a particular situation (Johnson, 2003).

Causes for Identity Crisis Identity:

Identity crisis can be caused by a variety of factors such as discrimination, exploitation, alienation, and deprivation. When people feel that they are not acknowledged, accepted, appreciated and are deprived of something that they are entitled to, then the crisis emerges. Identity crisis can happen to both majority and minority communities. However, most of the times the catastrophe occurs among the minority communities for fear of losing something that they have been enjoying for quite some time. According to Garg (2007), every ethnic group has its own distinct culture, language, and traditional institutions. The fact of belonging to one group often gives rise to follow feelings and sentiments. The fear of being assimilated with the dominant culture and the apprehension of being exploited make the minorities to fight for their common cause in preserving their identity. According to Bijukumar (2013), When people feel that they are a potential victim they strike back When people feel that others are a threat to their existence they fight for their survival even to the extent of ethnic cleansing. Conflict occurs when a group feels that they are vulnerable and if they do not act first, they will be at the receiving end. In most of the cases fear psychoses is the immediate cause of violence, though not the root cause.

The fact that the themes of the novels “Our Moon Has Blood Clots” by Rahul Pandita” and “A Long Dream of Home” by Siddhartha Gigoo may have the universal application that set out to study the exodus of Kashmiri Pundits and their search for identity, yet the Kashmir experience has parallels in conflict and resistance around the world. This makes the study of these two novels

socially important as it deals with the problems which are universal. By the study of the novels of these writers, the reader is led through a few decades of Kashmir history where the two countries, India and Pakistan are on proxy war, each claiming its territory its own, and this proxy war has led to the death and destruction of the people of Kashmir in general and the exile of Pundits in particular, not only physically but also socially, culturally and psychologically and many issues like identity crisis, alienation, depression and solitude among the inhabitants of Kashmir had taken place.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before going through the main components of this research paper, it is necessary to mention some details regarding the history of Kashmir and what are the causes which were responsible for Kashmir conflict and exodus of the Kashmiri Pundit community. The Kashmir Valley, also known as the Vale of Kashmir, is a valley in the part of the Kashmir region administered by India. The valley is bordered on the southwest by the Pir Panjal Range and on the northeast by the main Himalayas range. It is approximately 135 km long and 32 km wide, and drained by the River Jhelum.

Kashmir division is one of the three administrative divisions of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The Kashmir division borders Jammu Division to the south and Ladakh to the east while Line of Control forms its northern and the western border. In the first half of the 1st millennium, the Kashmir region became an important centre of Hinduism and later of Buddhism; later, in the ninth century, Kashmir Shaivism arose. Shah Mir became the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir in 1339, started the Salatanat-i-Kashmir or Swati dynasty. After that, Muslim monarchs ruled Kashmir for the next five hundred years, including the Mughals, who ruled from 1526 until 1751, and the Afghan Durrani Empire, which ruled from 1747 until 1819. That year, the Sikhs, under Ranjit Singh, annexed Kashmir. In 1846 after the Sikh defeat in the First Anglo-Sikh War, and upon the purchase of the region from the British under the Treaty of Amritsar, the Raja of Jammu, Gulab Singh, became the ruler of a new State of Jammu and Kashmir. The rule of his ancestors, under the paramountcy of the British Crown, lasted until 1947. In that year, facing a rebellion in the western districts of the state as well as an invasion by Pashtun tribes instigated by the Dominion of Pakistan, the Maharaja of the princely state signed the Instrument of Accession, joining the Dominion of India. Consequently, he transferred power to a popular government headed by Sheikh Abdullah. Following this, a war ensued between India and Pakistan. The region of the state, however, has been the centre of a dispute ever since, now administered by three countries: India, Pakistan, and the People's

Republic of China, the latter having taken control of Aksai Chin in 1964. Kashmir valley is however fully under the control of India and is about 15,948 Square Kilometres in area which is about 15.73% of the total area under Indian control.

By the end of 1990s, about half a million Kashmiri Pundits had left their homes in Kashmir. The displaced people sought refuge in Jammu and Jammu districts. Hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri Pundits found shelter in temples, sheds, barns, canvas tents and schools. Many others took rooms on rent. The role played by the people of Jammu region was laudable at those critical times. The displaced, jobless Kashmiri Pundits, many of them poor agriculturists wholly depending upon farming, lived on the meagre dole given to them by the government of Jammu and Kashmir. They suffered in migrant camps and private rented accommodations in Jammu and nearby districts. The camp dwellers lived in appalling conditions in canvas tents and dilapidated one room tenements that lacked even basic civic amenities. In these overcrowded spaces there was neither privacy nor security and safety. It was a life of degradation, deprivation and indignity. Year after year, the exiles struggled, nurturing hope and battling a deep sense of alienation and wretchedness. Thousands perished due to diseases, mental sickness, sunstrokes, hostile climatic conditions and accidents.

During the nineties, Kashmir passed through its darkest years of conflict and political upheaval in contemporary history. The popular uprising of the Muslims of Kashmir against the Indian state was met with force by the security forces in which thousands of civilians were killed among Muslims and Pundit community. Hartals, civil curfews, mass protests, bomb blasts, encounters, strikes, violent clashes between militants and the security forces, army crackdowns and detentions, became a way of life in Kashmir. Army and paramilitary forces launched full scale operations to control militancy. Thousands of Kashmiri Muslims - young and old - lost their lives. Kashmir became the one of the most militarized zones in the world and a very dangerous place to live and visit. The cycle of protests and violence continues even now. There seems no political solution in sight to restore peace, stability, normalcy in Kashmir.

The exodus of Kashmiri Pundits remains one of the darkest chapters in the history of contemporary India. 1990 (when the mass exile of Kashmiri Pundits started) is a turning point year in the history of Kashmiri Pundits. Many Kashmiri Pundit families are settled in different parts of India and some other countries while several hundreds of thousands are still languishing in the township for the displaced at Jagti near Nagrota and in other camps in the Jammu province of the J & K state. They continue to live as refugees in their own country, still unsure about where they belong.

Constantly overwhelmed by a sense of humiliation and displacement, their long cherished desire for a peaceful return is still unfulfilled. Even today they vacillate between despair and hope, and pray for normalcy to return to Kashmir.

Kashmiri Pundits still in Search for Their Homes and Identity:

In the current political scenario Kashmiri pundits are forgotten beings. The young and the middle aged visit Kashmir as tourists and pilgrims now. The stories of the struggles and plights of Kashmiri Pundit exiles have remained untold. The old are fading away, taking away with them the untold stories- stories of who they were, what they faced, what they lost, how they struggled and what remains now. Those who were born and brought up in exile are struggling to understand their own identities and the history of their elders. There are so many budding writers among the Kashmiri Pundits who had written reputed novels about the themes of identity, the exodus of Pundits from the Kashmir Valley in 1990s and their yearning to home coming. It is this burden of history that the writers like Rahul Pandita and Siddhartha Gigoo had come up with their two famous novels where they had touched the themes like Kashmir Conflict and Search for the identity among Kashmiri Pundits. It is these stories told by such sensitive writers which forthcoming Pundit community writers will have to carry for the rest of their lives and search for their identities. No doubt, people come across a number of crises in their personal, professional, cultural, political, religious and social interaction. Therefore crisis is part of human civilization. The success depends on how well people are able to tackle these crises and live amicably. One of the major crisis a community experiences is, when their identity is questioned or at stake. The identity of a person or a community speaks what a person or a group is all about. When a group feels that they are deprived of something that they deserve, people begin to polarize and fight for their demands. Most of the major conflicts occurred in history is based on ethnicity.

Our Moon Has Blood Clots is a heart touching novel written by Rahul Pandita in which he have highlighted the theme of exile along with the theme of the crisis of Identity among the pundits of Kashmir who have been exiled from the Kashmir. The author describes the brutal treatment they were subjected to, after which they were stripped of their identities and tagged as refugees. More than twenty-seven years ago, in the winter of 1990, about four hundred thousand Pandits of Kashmir were forced to leave Kashmir, their homeland, to save their lives when militancy erupted there. Even today, they continue to live as 'internally displaced migrants' in their own country. While most Kashmiri Pundits have now carved a niche

for themselves in different parts of India, several thousands are still languishing in migrant camps in and around Jammu. The stories of their struggles and plight have remained untold for years. The motif "our home in Kashmir has twenty two rooms" is repeated again and again in the beginning of some chapters of the novel, "Our Moon Has Blood Clots". For the mother of the Author of the novel, Home is everything. Home is her identity. In exile, she often repeats the story of her home in front of everyone. Her husband used to tell her, "for God's sake, don't repeat your home story in front of everyone". Rahul Pandita further says, "the home story was a statement that Ma had got in the habit of telling anyone who would listen. It didn't matter to her whether they cared or not. I had become a part of herself, entrenched like a precious stone in the mosaic of her identity."

Before the exodus of the Kashmiri pundits, Pundits of Kashmir used to celebrate every event and festival with pomp and show, every festival and event of pundits is unique and different as compared to the Hindus of the other states of India. These events and festivals of the Kashmiri pundits represent their social and cultural identity as well as their ethnicity. These pundits have their own traditions, customs and social norms which they are attached and for which they cherish and value. In exile, they tried their best to remain firm with their roots but with the passage of time the elders among Kashmiri pundits died, who were the representatives of cultural, historical, ethical and traditional norms, started to lose identity and a new generation of pundits, who were born during exile in the migrant camps and other parts of the country have assimilated their languages and their way of living, were uprooted from the language, traditions and customs their parents used to love. But Kashmiri pundits are very optimistic and hopeful for the time when they will return to their homes and to their land what they called Paradise (Kashmir).

The exile and exodus of Kashmiri pundits' stories 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 India, trying to eke out a living even as they dream of their lost homeland. It's against this backdrop that *A Long Dream of Home*, a collection of memoirs of Kashmiri Pundits, was published to commemorate 25 years since they were hounded out of their homes. Edited by Siddhartha Gigoo

and Varad Sharma, it is one of the few documentation exercises carried out to tell the story of Kashmiri Pundits and their search for identity and their yearning for the home coming, who were basically the ethnic minority of the region.

A significant testimony of a community that has been ignored by many state and central governments, the book features haunting memoirs of three generations of Pundits and is divided into four sections. Part I: *Nights of Terror* features narratives of what Pundits witnessed and faced in Kashmir from 1989 to 1991. Part II: *Summers of Exile* has Pundits talking about how they have struggled to survive during the past 25 years. Part III: *Days of Parting* is about the horrific events and circumstances leading to the mass exodus of Pundits from Kashmir. Part IV: *Seasons of Longing* reveals the desire of the Pundits to return to their homes. The book "A Long Dream of Home" also contains heartbreaking pictures of abandoned houses and ruins of the temples of Pundits in Kashmir, along with the dismal living conditions of migration camps in Jammu province, where they lived after fleeing from Kashmir. Hundreds of Pundits still live in these areas. The contributors to the memoirs come from all walks of life and age groups. People such as Sushant Dhar, who was one-and-a-half-years when his family left Kashmir, Vaishali Dhar, who lives in the migrant camps for Kashmiri Pundits at Muthi in Jammu, and Prithvi Nath Kabu, born in 1934, who worked as a teacher in Kashmir and also lives in Muthi. There are accounts from Kishore Pran, an award-winning writer, playwright, painter and filmmaker, Meenakshi Raina, a novelist who lives in Canada, Minakshi Watts, a poet-painter who runs a literary journal in Delhi, Ramesh Hingloo, founder of a community radio service – Radio Sharda, Rattan Lal Shant, a writer, Kashi Nath Pandita, a writer-educationist and Badri Raina, a writer-teacher.

While the writings tend to get repetitive, they cannot be dismissed as not 'engaging enough'. For they tell you of collective trauma and hopes and disappointments of thousands of people who have lost a way of life. As Gigoo puts it in his essay *Season of Ashes* and describes how his grandfather was never the same after leaving Kashmir, "The first shock he experienced was when he crossed the Jawahar Tunnel, in Banihal. He was in a truck with his family, leaving Kashmir for Jammu in 1991. When the truck exited the three-kilometer long tunnel, the entire landscape had changed. Something changed in him that day. And the tunnel became the tunnel of forgetfulness, not just for him, but countless other elders who were leaving Kashmir for unknown places for the first time in their lives."

III. CONCLUSION

In these two novels, the authors attempt to provide readers with a clear picture about the tough times faced by the Pundits. The emotions are captured powerfully and the condition of the troubled state is explained in these memoirs. There was a time when the Kashmiri Pundits and the Muslims stayed together peacefully, until the Pundits were forced to exile. More than 350,000 Pundits were forced into exile. The authors of these memoirs say that the heartbreaking story of Kashmir has so far been told through the prism of the brutality of the Indian state, and the pro-independence demands of separatists. But there is another part of the story that has remained unrecorded and buried. *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* and *A Long Dream of Home* are the unspoken chapters in the story of Kashmir, in which it was purged of the Kashmiri Pundit community in a violent ethnic cleansing backed by Islamist militants. Hundreds of people were tortured and killed, and about 350,000 Kashmiri Pundits were forced to leave their homes and spend the rest of their lives in exile in their own country, who are still longing to come to their homes in Kashmir. Rahul Pandita and Sidhartha Gigoo has written a deeply personal, powerful and unforgettable stories of history, home and loss of Identity and search for it. These narratives explore several aspects of the history, cultural identity and existence of the Kashmiri Pundits. These are untold narratives about the persecution of Pundits in Kashmir during the advent of militancy in 1989, the killings and kidnappings, loss of homeland, uprootedness, camp-life, struggle, survival, alienation and an ardent yearning to return to their land. These are stories about the re-discovery of their past, their ancestry, culture, and roots and moorings. These books are about those painful moments of Kashmiri Pundits who has suffered and still suffering without any mistake.

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