

# The 'Ethnic Cleansing' Of Kashmiri Pandits In 1990

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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. Hence, the night of January 19, 1990 was a dreadful night for Kashmiri Pandits. 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*: Exile, Kashmiri Pandits, Ethnic Cleansing, Homelessness, Violence, Chaos.

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?

The night of January 19, 1990 was no ordinary one in the lives of Kashmiri Pandits. It was a cold and bitter one. Around 9pm, suddenly 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.

There were shouts on loudspeakers from Mosque tops:

- Kafiro Kashmir Chor do (Infidels- Leave Kashmir)
- Indian Dogs- Go Back
- Hum Kya Chahtey- Azadi (We Want Freedom)
- Asi Gachchi Pakistan, Batao Roas Te Batanev Saan (We Want Pakistan- With Panditanis, Without Pandits)
- Jis Kashmir Ko Khoon Se Seencha Hai Who Kashmir Hamara Hai (The Kashmir we have irrigated with blood- that Kashmir belongs to us)
- Kashmir Mei Agar Rehna Hai, Allah- O- Akbar Kehna Hai (If you to stay in Kashmir, you have to say Allah- O- Akhbar)
- Yahan Kya Chalega, Nizam- E- Mustafa (What do you want here? Rule of Shariah)

(Bhat 43 44)

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. Prior to the 'Exodus Day', as 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1990 is called, there were many barbaric activities which were strictly imposed by the militants. All modes of entertainment were closed, there was a dress code for women which had to be strictly observed, the sign-boards all over Kashmir were changed from English to Urdu with green background (green background because it denoted Pakistan's flag), time was changed to Pakistan Standard Time, every Friday was observed as a holiday for mass prayers and young children (Muslim) were protesting against Hindus living in the Valley. The most distressing sight to witness was that the militants walking freely on the streets of once- a- paradise on earth and randomly killing people, whether old or young. The morality was dying.

The telephone began to ring in most of the houses where Pandits resided in Srinagar. The night of 19<sup>th</sup> January was a horrific night. People were concerned about the whereabouts and well-being of their relatives. The sight on the streets of Kashmir was no different than other regular days of chaos or mayhem but the intensity of it was like never before. That dreary night unleashed the one of the darkest nights in the history of Kashmir. The entire Muslim population- young, old and women were out on the streets (some willingly and some unwillingly due to fear) yelling pro- Islam slogans and warning all the Pandits to flee from Kashmir. They made violent gestures from the loudspeakers with a mix of some Quranic verses, anti- Hindu and anti- India slogans and some revolutionary songs. The aim of such loud outbursts was to make the Pandits understand that their time is over, there is now no place for any Hindu in the valley of Kashmir and that ethnic cleansing was the need of the hour. It seemed as the night would not end until all the Pandits would voluntarily or involuntarily leave their homeland.

Like frightened pigeons, the Pandits quickly gathered in their houses but were awake all night. Nobody dared to step outside the house, not even to offer prayers in the temple. The question that caused great trouble to all the Pandits was that how will they survive in their homeland without the goodwill of the majority community with whom they have had many years of good and brotherly relations. The year 1990 was marked in the history of all Kashmiris as the most gruesome and dreadful year where the Pandits had to pay a price for being a minority community in their own homeland. The administration collapsed and law and order were thrown to winds. The police deserted their posts and the Pandits were left to themselves with their survival hanging in balance.

The most distressing sight for the Pandits was how their neighbours had transformed overnight. They had changed to such an extent as if they had a mask on them which they threw off when the situation changed. Most Pandits and Muslims neighbours who had known each for generations suddenly began to behave as strangers. Suspicions loomed large and Pandits were soon called 'kafirs' or 'others' or outsiders. The government was knocked out on the night of exodus when the militants revolted and resisted and as a result, not a single policeman was seen anywhere in the city. Law and order collapsed and the police was underground. Hence, from January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1990, the rule of Shariah began and Islam was the only religion practiced there. There were continuous announcements and loud warnings from the mosque cautioning all the remaining Kashmiri Pandits to leave the valley immediately.

The hate towards the Pandits, the anti- Hindu slogans and pro- Islam shout outs through inhuman and barbaric means of violence, instilled fear and panic among all the Kashmiris to the extent that nobody was prepared to exhibit even the slightest goodwill to the Pandits. *Al Safa*, a local Urdu newspaper of Srinagar explicitly published a statement, telling the Pandits to leave Kashmir immediately if they want to save their lives (This statement was published for all the remaining Pandits in the valley who had still not left). The militants wanted to make Kashmir, Pandit- free. Fear and panic stricken Pandits did not find any source or back up to insure their safety of life. In its evening news bulletin, Radio Kashmir took the name of the Kashmiri Pandits gunned down by terrorists. The horrifying stories of murder of unfortunate Kashmiri Pandits unnerved the people from their community.

Because the law and order had crumbled, there was no sense of approaching the majority community for any sort of help or shelter. The dynamics of secret and selective militancy so rigidly drilled into the heads of the young boys (aspiring to become militants), had reached a level that the son who returned after the training never disclosed to his family members where he had been and on what mission. Indoctrination was of the level that even parents began to fear their sons. This is best explained in the television interview which Bitta Karate gave to the security officials after he was arrested and interrogated by security agencies.

Bitta Karate was a gunman of Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front who crossed the Pakistan Administered Jammu and Kashmir in 1989 who received militancy training in the camps built there. In an interview, the journalist asked him on whose instructions did he carry out the killing of the Kashmiri Pandits. He was instructed to do that by his seniors Amanullah Khan and Ashfaq Wani. He was further asked if he was asked to killed children or old people, would he do that as well, he, without any hesitation said, "YES". Such was the level of brutality and inhumaneness that was practiced in Kashmir by the militants. On being asked the number of Kashmiri Pandits killed, rather murdered by him, he could not recall the exact number. There were so many Pandits that he killed. The murder that he first committed was of an old friend, Satish Kumar Tiku who was also his old class fellow and often visited him. Karate had returned after undergoing training in terrorist camps and Satish, not knowing where his friend had disappeared for a while, went to see him at his home. He found Bitta cleaning a gun. Surprised on seeing the weapon, Satish asked him what it was. Bitta avoided the question and said that it was a toy he played with. Naïve as Satish was, he took it lightly and soon forgot the incident and left his friend. But Bitta was greatly disturbed and went to see his senior, commander, told him about the whole incident and asked for his directions. The commander told him to kill Satish. Bitta went to Satish's house and called him to come out of his home. No sooner did Satish step out on the street, Bitta, in a flash of a moment,

aimed his pistol at him and fired shots that pierced through Satish's heart. He fell down dead in a pool of blood. In broad day light, Bitta scared the pedestrians and walked away in complete confidence. Karate's companion, Yasin Malik was arrested because he killed six Indian Air Force officials at Barzulla, Srinagar. He later on became the chief of Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front in Indian Administered J & K.

Girija Tickoo, a Pandit teacher at a government school in Kupwara district was leaving the school premises when suddenly one day some militants grabbed her, kidnapped her and then raped her. The kidnappers were fearful that she might disclose their identity (as they were known faces) and then realising that killed and cut her body into pieces, leaving no trace behind. Lassa Kaul, Director Doordarshan (Television) Srinagar was gunned down outside his own house in Bhan Mohalla. He was accused of disclosing some anti-militancy news. Pandit Premnath Bhat of Anantnag who was a lawyer by profession and a very popular social figure. Masked Jihadis barged into his house, dragged him out and emptied on him their magazines of their guns. Professor Nilakanth Raina (Lala) of Jammu and Kashmir Government Higher Education Department, an eminent historian and researcher was called by masked and armed gunmen at about dusk at his home in Fateh Kadal locality in Srinagar and gunned down at point blank range. Professor Nilakanth was conducting researches into the Buddhist antiquity of Jama Masjid mosque in Nowhatta, Srinagar. On November 1989, Sheela Tikoo was gunned down near Habba Kadal. On 4<sup>th</sup> of March, 1990, Mrs. M. N. Paul, the wife of an Inspector of BSF was kidnapped, raped and then murdered because she happened to be the wife of a government official. Also in March 1990, B.K. Ganjoo, an engineer in Telecommunication Department was brutally gunned down while he tried to hide himself in an empty drum used for storing rice. The assailants climbed the third floor of his house to catch hold of him. His wife begged the murderers to kill her too but only to receive the sadist remark, "*there should be someone left to cry over his dead body*". On April 1990, a nurse named Sarla Bhat was kidnapped and continuously raped for several days before her dead body was thrown on the roadside.

On May 1990, Mrs. Prana Ganjoo and her husband Prof. K.L. Ganjoo were kidnapped in Sopore where the woman was raped and then both of them were murdered. On June 1990, Mrs. J. L. Ganjoo, her husband and her sister-in-law were killed at their residence in Ban Mohalla, Srinagar. On July 1990, a working woman, namely Teja Dhar was shot dead on the roadside in Ali Kadal, Srinagar. On July 1990, a Pandit lady named Nanaji was gunned down on the roadside in Batamaloo, Srinagar. On July 1990, Dr. Shani was locked up in her house in Karan Nagar and then the house was set on fire. Flames consumed her alive. On August 1990, Babli Raina was raped in front of her family members in her house and then shot dead. One particular case which literally butchered the tradition of tolerance and communal harmony as well as the tradition of humanism in the Valley of Kashmir happened on 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1990, when four armed persons forced entry into the house of Sarwanand Koul Premi at Anantnag district. They dragged him out of his house along with Virender Koul, his 27-year old son for 'enquiry' and in the nearby jungle, the father and son both were gunned down. Sarwanand Koul, a poet and scholar, was 64 years of age and had translated the Bhagwat Gita into Kashmiri. A copy of the Quran was preserved in his house which he used to read occasionally.

The above statistics are not complete, hence there are many violent deaths, murders and rapes which were not documented and details of which will never be known to anyone. However, Panun Kashmir, an organisation formed by the Kashmiris, for the Kashmiris and of the Kashmiris who are displaced has documented a list of approximately 1341 killings of Kashmiri Pandits by the militants during the course of militancy in Kashmir, 1990. This documentation included the disappeared and fished out Pandits, whose identity was not established and the police kept no record of them. Interestingly, the government of Jammu and Kashmir tried to distort the figure of killings of Kashmiri Pandits to escape the censure by the United Nations, which according to Tokyo Convention has recognized killings beyond 200 as genocide. It must be noted that the National Commission for Human Rights of India while considering the appeal of the Kashmiri Pandits, said that they were subjected to killings 'akin to genocide'. As disorder and lawlessness gripped the Valley, the Pandits shivered with fear. This was the atmosphere of fear and lawlessness in which the Pandits became homeless. In these circumstances it was but natural that the entire Pandit community stood fear-stricken and then followed the impulse of running away from this cauldron. The entire community had lost the confidence in the majority community.

Members of a high ranking delegation of parliamentarians visiting Srinagar to assess the ground situation quarrelled among themselves on seating arrangements in the meeting room. They showed little understanding and interest in the critical situation in the Valley and the sword of death hanging on the head of the minority community. The Pandits found that the Indian government, too, had written them off. Threatened Pandits had no option but to leave their homeland, homes, properties, jobs, business, farms, orchards, temples, shrines, cremation grounds, Gods, deities, and the ashes of their forefathers. They engaged whatever means of transportation they could manage, took only a handful of clothing and headed out of the Valley to a destination unknown to them. This process was an ongoing one and continued for the first two-three months of 1990. Despite the fact that thousands of soldiers were garrisoned in Badami Bagh Cantonment, Srinagar, not one soldier escorted the fleeing fugitives. In spite of the silence of the Kashmiri Muslims on the atrocities committed against the Kashmiri Pandits, the general masses of Kashmiri Muslims did not obstruct the exit of the Kashmiri Pandits and facilitated their safe journey out of the Kashmir Valley.

On seeing the current rise in Islamic fundamentalism and radicalization of the youth of the Valley of Kashmir, it can be concluded that the Kashmir Valley's ethnic cleansing is complete and everlasting. They have been banished from their birth place not for decades or centuries or millennia, but for all times to come. The houses of Kashmiri Pandits remained abandoned and like a carcass after their departure. The thieves, mostly militants looted their houses, their furniture, gadgets, kitchenware, accessories and other goods. They did not even leave their important files and other documents. Taps and other sanitary fittings along with electricity connections and installations were also looted or sold. In many houses, doors and windows were also stolen. Leaving aside the night of January 19, 1990 when the Pandit houses were set on fire, even after the Pandits left, the anger and hatred which the militants instilled within the hearts of the Muslims, made them set fire on Pandit's bare structures as well. The beautifully built houses and mansions of Kashmiri Pandits were sold for peanuts. Their businesses, their shops were taken over by the remaining locals in the Valley. In many villages, the ruins of torched Pandit houses were grabbed and showed as Muslim Endowment property in revenue records. If, by any chance, any Pandit tried selling his property, he had to remain content with its throw-away price. Landed properties of Pandit shrines, temples and crematoriums stand largely vandalized and usurped. The ethnic cleansing of the Valley of Kashmir was hence, completed.

Who knew then that decades later a terror will come to Srinagar  
and I will be unable to see my home where I was born  
where we had played cowries on many new snows.  
The terrorists want us to bury our past  
forget the deeds of our ancestors (Kak 33-37).

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