Kashmiri Pandits and the Hierarchization of Victimhood

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Abstract: *For three decades the narrative of Kashmiri Pandit migration has developed it as the exceptional event that ruptured the centuries old secularist traditions of Kashmir. It becomes pertinent to locate this discourse in the local as well as the 'national' developments that have shaped it and at the same time been impacted by it. The current paper problematizes terminologies such as communalism, secularism and nationalism in the context of Kashmiri society and Kashmiri Pandit migration and deploys that framework to discuss Indian occupation of Kashmir and disenfranchisement emerging from class and caste-based marginalization among societies in the subcontinent.*

The year 2020 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the unfortunate mass migration of Kashmiri Pandits (KP) from the valley of Kashmir to various Indian cities. Over the past three decades the memorialization of KP migrations has been seen in Bollywood films, installation art, dedicated volumes in academic journals, special features in celebrated magazines and a myriad of other ways. In 2017, I discussed in a book review (Johar, 2017) that since 1990 close to four-dozen books were published on Kashmiri Pandits as the primary focus. The number of such cultural and literary products memorializing KP migration and history has grown exponentially since, accompanied by other forms of cultural production.

This essay explores what it may mean to invest repeatedly in literature, cinema and other cultural products depicting Kashmiri Pandit migration with respect to the extension of Indian occupation of Kashmir. Instead of focusing on the content and form of such cultural products it attempts to analyse the role they perform in creating a narrative that serves both political and social functions.

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The current essay is the fourth in a series of research papers and book reviews that have engaged with the question of Kashmiri Pandit migration. The previous papers have discussed KP migration along with multiple other instances of forced migration of lower castes in the subcontinent, the distribution of KP migrant population in the migrant camps/flats and various Indian cities (Johar, 2017), the state of affirmative action designed specially for KP population and the validity of such programs based on the social justice framework (Johar, 2018), the historical class and land relations of Kashmiri Pandits and other upper castes in Kashmir (Johar, 2019) among others. In order to take the discussion forward this essay explores the reasons behind the projection of Kashmiri Pandits as the most 'prominent victims' in the ongoing contestation over the region loosely referred to as Kashmir between Kashmiri nationalists, India, and Pakistan. It argues that Kashmiri Pandit migration and the measures taken in its wake by the Indian state have played an important role in extending the hegemony of the Brahmin class over Bahujans in India on one hand, and deployed it as an instrument of moral coercion over non-Brahmin Kashmiris on the other.

Communalism-Secularism binary as a Political Tool

It is almost a reflex action for Indian intelligentsia to refer to Kashmiri Pandit migration in response to the question of colonial practices by the Indian ruling classes in Kashmir. Their articulation, most often, includes terms such as communalism and Islamic fundamentalism to refer to nationalist political and militant assertions that have emerged from Kashmir. The complexity of Kashmiri Pandit migration, which is as much informed by historical factors in the relationship between Pandits and other caste groups in Kashmir as by their relationship with the Indian state, has been reduced to a mere act of communalism on the part of Kashmiri Muslims. The current section problematizes such terminologies by analysing their political function and linking it to Indian ruling class interests.

The oft-cited instance of communalism against Brahmins of Kashmir is traced to the times of Sultan Sikander (r. 1389-1413), a Muslim ruler of Kashmir. The infamous reputation of Sultan Sikandar as idol breaker and temple looter (Zutshi, 1986; Pandita, 2009; Wakhlu, 2011), primarily fashioned at the hands of Pandit chroniclers, owes to the part his administration played in shifting power from Brahmins to Muslim upper castes or Baihaqi Syeds (Parmu, 1969). In such accounts, even though religion has been used as the primary category of analysis by the chroniclers, the actual struggle for power was between Brahmins and Syeds who were vying for power in the Kashmir darbar. The ire against Sultan Sikandar from Brahmin chroniclers, including Jonaraja, also owes to the fact that Sikandar was focussing on one class of people, that is, Brahmins, and by extension of that on the rich temples with expensive idols and accumulated wealth to pay for the demands made by his aggressor Timur on the Kashmir darbar in 1399 CE[1]. The facts related to

[1] For more on this see Parmu, 1969

Sikandar being an iconoclast and a temple destroyer are not contested here. Rather, further analysis of relevant events is important to understand the social equations of that time and context. According to the accounts of Abul Fazl and Mirza Haidar Dughlat, there were close to a hundred and fifty temples around Kashmir Valley after the alleged full-scale destruction of temples by Sultan Sikandar (Parmu, 1969). Hence, there appears to be a certain kind of exaggeration employed to popularise the event as a Hindu-Muslim struggle and make it a purely 'communal' affair. The interests of the growing Syed groups lay elsewhere, that is, in destabilizing and replacing Brahmins from positions of power in Kashmir, something they definitely did not succeed in, as the data on Pandit representation in the succeeding regimes convey. Thus, what needs to be highlighted here is the casting of the class struggle between two elite groups into communalism on part of a Muslim king against a supposedly 'Hindu' population. Such formulations are not only misplaced but also mislead in relating to a past which unfolded in a very different social and historical context.

The period during which the most recent Kashmiri Pandit migration took place was not the first time that communalism as a strategically loaded term was deployed by the Brahmin class in Kashmir. The first half of the 20th century saw many instances when Kashmiri Brahmins acted as a class and fought against any and every such community and group that threatened their class interests. Interestingly, they made use of regional, religious and caste identities and shifted from one to the other whenever it suited them.

From 1889 onwards, they actively mobilised against Punjabi Hindus who were competing for jobs in the Kashmir darbar. They mobilised actively between 1899 and 1927 to put pressure on the state to define the title of 'hereditary state subject' so that people from outside J&K state were not permitted to work in state positions. However, in the first half of the 20th century they saw new threats to their stranglehold on state services from upper caste Kashmiri Muslims. The upper caste Kashmiri Muslims were actively working towards securing their place in state services after having witnessed the near collapse of shawl trade in the wake of the Franco-German war in the 1870s. They were demanding reservations for their wards given that there was close to nil representation of 'Muslims' in different state departments. Since Kashmiri Brahmins could not invoke the insider-outsider dichotomy with their Muslim neighbours, this time they called it a communal move on the part of the state to divide the population into Muslims and Hindus.

One of many such instances is from 1930 when a prominent class of upper-caste Muslims started to claim their share in the educational sphere and state services. After much agitation and repeated tendering of memorandums by Kashmiri Muslim elites for representation in the bureaucracy, the Srinagar Municipality brought out a job notice for a number of posts only for Muslim candidates. The Pandits took strong objection to it and referred to it as a 'communal' move by the state administration. Their agitation came to such a point that the administration had to rescind the notice (Zutshi, 1986, pp. 224-25).

These examples illustrate how religion has been strategically used in order to meet certain economic ends and it continues to be used in the same manner. It is no coincidence that the discourse around Kashmir Pandit migration invariably shifts towards planning economic packages, job opportunities and reservations for the 'migrant victims impacted by communalism on the part of Kashmiri Muslims.'

The recurring concern of media, academicians and others with respect to the 'poorer' sections of Kashmiri Brahmins is the lurking anxiety of 'how can pandits remain poor', however little their numbers may be? If one closely examines most of the news items, memoirs and narratives regarding the plight of Kashmiri Pandit migrants and those Pandits who still live in the valley, it is their economic state of being that emerges as the primary concern alongside the trauma of the migration. The anguish and pain that emanates from the fact of forced migration cannot be denied in the case of Kashmiri Pandits. At the same time it cannot be delinked from the complete state of disarray and violence their non-Pandit neighbours have been in for almost three decades following the inability of the state to fulfil its responsibilities and promises. The existence of whatever number of 'poor' Pandits remain is highlighted as a blot on the collective morality of Kashmiris and Indians. In a society striving for equality, the socio-economic well-being of Kashmiri Brahmins should not exist in isolation from others in the same village, district, state or the country. Elsewhere, I have discussed the plight of multiple instances of forced migration that have led to the scattered population of migrants cutting across religious lines who have been living for many decades without any of the effective measures and amenities provided to Kashmiri Pandit migrants by the state authorities[2]. Given the heterogeneity of such groups in terms of religion, region, gender and so on, the only marker of difference between them and Kashmiri Pandits is that of caste.

With the general understanding of secularism propagated in academia, ignoring local historical contexts wherein socio-economic identities instead of religious identities lie at the base of overall disenfranchisement, there is always a lurking danger of falling for categories that have been constructed by the Indian and their allied intelligentsia for the Kashmiris-demanding-self-determination to fall into.

The idea of a monolithic religious identity, whether Hindu or Muslim, has only proven to be troublesome for movements demanding their own future outside the hegemonic and dominant idea of India. The juggernaut of Kashmiri Pandit narrative being pushed forth by ideological groups aligning from left-to-right of the political spectrum in India attest to the significance of associations that pre-determine the fate of entire caste groups. It can be further understood by analysing the treatment of other migrant groups within India by the same state apparatuses and groups. Migrant groups such as Namasudras, the lower caste Muslims from Muzaffarnagar and Gujarat, Dalit migrants from Mirchpur and Bhagana who are also conveniently recognised as 'Hindus', do not

[2] See Johar 2017, 2018.

qualify in capturing either the screen space or art galleries or literature on forced migration as do the Kashmiri Pandits. It cannot be denied that such incidents and groups will not be commoditized in the years to come but that shall also take place when it suits the interests of the ruling classes. The scale of state measures that have been provided to Kashmiri Pandits are such that the Pandits left behind in the valley lament that they should have left with others during the 1990s so that they could have had access to such opportunities which may never be available to the residents of the valley[3]. It is important to reiterate that even within their immediate social structure in the valley the primary distance between Kashmiri Pandits and other caste groups was not based on religion as much as it was based on their status of being the ruling classes/castes that controlled the resources in Kashmir along with a handful of other Muslim castes. This delinking from religion is a significant aspect that has not been emphasized enough in the literature on Kashmir. The social location of Kashmiri Pandits is stressed in their very identification as Brahmins or popularly as Kashmiri Pandits.

The history of Kashmir cannot be simplistically reduced to the history of competing religions. Over the past few centuries multiple social groups such as Tantrins, Ekangas, Lavanyas, Syeds, Brahmins among others have been struggling to either compete for or to maintain their control over resources. In some of these instances one does not even have enough evidence of the religious practices of entire populations. Some of these identities systematically got appropriated into uniform-seeming religious identities and were given precedence over other identities by the British as well as Indian colonial enumerators and archive makers. A cursory look at the J&K census records up to 1941 conveys how different social groups and their populations were recorded separately by the census takers. It does not mean to say that the colonial masters invented these categories, instead they were trying to uniformise a complex mix of socio-cultural identities into neat packets for administrative consumption.

By keeping a secularism as an ideal that is selectively governed by the needs and requirements of the Indian ruling classes the competing groups and regions can only fall into a quagmire where the only epithets reserved for them are communal and barbaric and so on. The discussion needs to be brought back to the point wherein secularism is looked at in its national and class character and analyse how it draws from the kind of social composition that defines a particular society. To limit it to the popularised category of religion will only serve the interests of the ruling classes. By abiding to the Indian Savarna groups' selective idea of secularism one falls prey to the kind of politics that are at play today and have led to the current state of affairs wherein the Hindutva parties are also defending their standpoint by advocating for the rights of 'minorities' in Muslim

[3] See https://indianexpress.com/article/india/homeless-at-home-express-series-kashmiri-pandits-in-kashmir-6241798/

dominated countries. The idea of a religion-oriented discourse has only taken nation-states in the Indian subcontinent so far.

The idea of an uncritical and romanticised harmonious past can do more harm than providing any understanding of Kashmiri society. In fact various state actors from within and outside Kashmir have deployed that very idea to blame everything on the militancy and the movement for self-determination and its role in jeopardising inter-religious relations in Kashmir. Thus it becomes all the more significant to analyse the society in its actual terms and move away from a minority-majority, Hindu-Muslim and similarly devised identities that only serve the purpose of obfuscating the facts on one hand and help governing classes in further consolidation of their control and power on the other.

It has not been emphasized enough that Kashmiri struggle for self-determination actually emerged from as much a regional and ethnic assertion as it was a class-based fight against the ruling and occupying forces[4]. The rhetoric of religious identification is a double-edged knife, for it not only creates a popularised fundamentalist imagery of the freedom struggle but it also paints a victimised picture of a community such as Kashmiri Pandits that hold much power and control of resources at both local as well as the 'national' level.

Kashmiri Pandits vs Kashmiri Nationalism

The fundamental issue with the Kashmiri Pandit migration is that it has only been analysed within the framework and limits set by the idea of India, which is the hegemonic device through which Kashmir and Kashmiri aspirations are assessed. When located within the social and economic context of Kashmir and India, the Brahmins of Kashmir would make for a substantially powerful and proportionally well-represented community in political, administrative, cultural, entrepreneurial, and educational domains, as suggested by relevant data[5].

For Kashmiris it is in the light of Kashmiri nationalism that complex issues such as militancy and Kashmiri Pandit migration have unfolded. The antagonism that became apparent between Brahmin ruling classes and Kashmiri nationalists was as much a function of historical inequities as it was the immediate opposition of Kashmiri nationalism by Kashmiri Brahmins. It was a well-known fact among the local populace that the majority of the Kashmiri Brahmins stood for a place within the Indian union and many of them actively worked as the functionaries of the state and political outfits such as the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian National Congress. It needs to be underscored that Kashmiri Pandits' preference for India over an independent Kashmir is rooted not simply in a religious identity but in their identification with the larger Brahmin group that, in 1947, ensured its control over India as a political unit for the first time in the history of the

[4] For more on this see Malik, 2018; and Khandy, 2020,

[5] See Johar, 2017, 2018, 2019.

subcontinent[6]. The construction of an Indian nation-state at the cost of varying national identities of multiple regions was primarily a product of the mobilization by and consolidation of Brahmin and allied caste groups, which, in 1947, all gravitated towards Delhi as the centre of their collective power. In the decades following independence, centralisation of power in New Delhi grew in a most asymmetrical manner. The federal nature of the constitution was undermined repeatedly at different junctures in the political history of the country. The very first elected government of J&K was undercut by the arrest of its Prime minister in 1953, a trend that continued in the succeeding decades. The central government in Delhi flouted all the contracts it had made with the people of various regions, including J&K, that had existed as separate political units before their temporary merger or annexation to India, which itself has been contested time and again by Kashmiri scholars and activists. It was a tacit understanding between the ruling classes such as the Kashmiri Brahmins that their interests were secured by aligning with the Brahmin and allied groups from other regions and princely states.

As per the given narrative it is clear that Kashmiri Pandits rejected the idea of Kashmiri nationalism for Indian nationalism. It then needs to be analysed why did they choose a nationalism which neither emerged from their cultural moorings nor from an ethnicity/linguistic based assertion as has been seen in different parts of the world[7]? What kind of grouping did they choose over a nationalism that emerged from the people who have lived alongside them for hundreds of years? The answers may lie in the kind of class preferences that emerge from caste-based group identities and were chosen over others by the dominant classes of the subcontinent in the colonial as well as the postcolonial period. Kashmiri Pandits played an active role in the most significant positions in the government and extra-government domains. Individuals such as P.N. Haksar, S.K. Kaul, Rameshwar Nath Kaw, and K.N. Kaul constitute some of the many KP names that functioned as the primary appendages of the Indian state. Thousands of KPs worked in top positions in private establishments as well. Things haven't changed a great deal after the infamous migration of 1990 and the subsequent ones in the next two decades. In fact, in the post-migration period various state Institutions have ensured that KPs do not lag behind in any of the spheres[8].

It is not just a matter of forced migration but also a matter of re-establishing a caste in a supposedly democratic and egalitarian milieu by demonising a complex mix of Kashmiri people as Muslim fanatics on the one hand and on the other putting together special provisions and resources for KPs by siphoning it off from of the most marginalised sections of the larger Indian society. The very phrase Kashmiri Pandit migration carries in it a regional/ethnic and caste identity instead of a religious identity, a fact that is often neglected for their selective identification with an impossible

6 See Mani, 2005; Aloysius, 1997

7 See Anderson, 2006; Aloysius, 1997

8 For more on this See Johar, 2017 and 2018.

and imagined 'Hindu' religious community. It is selective in the sense that such forging of religious identities only takes place in moments when the ruling classes need to constitute a numerically preponderant mass of people who can be pitted against the constructed enemy religion i.e. Muslims, which in itself is not a homogenous category.

The Cost of KP Migration on Bahujans of India

In the larger Indian context, the events that have unfolded in India and Kashmir over the past three decades need to be further analysed with respect to the counter-struggle of ruling classes against the subjugated sections that are asserting their rights to reshape existing power equations.

In a macro sense the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the assertions by a gamut of marginalised castes in India against the complete control of organized sector employment by Brahmin and allied castes. This led to the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal commission in securing reserved seats for a large number of groups recognised as Other Backward Classes. On the other hand, the long-drawn Kashmiri fight for self-determination against the Indian state was intensified in the form of a militant struggle beginning in 1989. Kashmiri Pandit migrations were concurrent with Mandal Commission reforms and for the first time more than half of the Indian population constituting of Bahujan classes were promised the legal means to claim their share in the services and educational sphere. However, even before the Mandal commission recommendations could be implemented, reservations for Kashmiri Pandits were announced in different Indian states. The fact that the community was in disarray after a sudden social mishap cannot be denied. However, the question needs to be asked whether they met the criteria for the award of reservations in jobs and educational sphere? The Mandal commission used a seven-point formulation to determine whether a community as a whole could be considered 'backward' and lacking the means to ensure well-being of its population. The idea behind affirmative action was not abstract; rather it was well defined and required to follow the existing guidelines. These guidelines were in the public domain for state agencies to implement. More importantly, the treatment of 'Kashmiri migrants' was unprecedented and followed almost an exception when compared with other migrant groups. In the recent history of postcolonial India, none of the migrant communities, with the exception of Punjabi and Bengali Brahmin-Savarna groups from regions now known as Pakistan and Bangladesh, were given the kind of treatment Kashmiri Pandits demanded and in fact, were granted, en masse. A close scrutiny of migration within the Republic of India is telling of the way the Indian state looks at the migrants through the lens of their social location in the society, an aspect that requires due space, which is beyond the purview of this paper. In light of the fact that from within the limited resources of a historically privileged community which could not have proved its 'backwardness' on any of the indicators was provided

with exclusive rights over a disproportionate amount of resources when calculated in proportion to the actual population of the KP migrants[9].

The unfolding of the narratives that have emerged in Kashmir have failed to take into consideration the fact that the developments and measures taken by the Indian state in Kashmir have a socio-economic and human cost which is borne by Indians, mostly from Bahujan backgrounds. This rising burden is visible in the casualties of lower rung soldiers from paramilitary forces, a majority of whom come from Bahujan backgrounds committing to the promise of a secured 'government' job and a stable future for their children in a society where employment, if one can get any, in modern state institutions continues to follow a caste-based distribution.

In that context, events such as KP migration and the measures undertaken afterwards have impacted the divide between Brahmin caste members and Bahujans for various state governments siphoned away resources to re-establish the 'traditional' role of the Kashmiri Brahmins in various Indian states by reserving seats in government offices and educational institutions.

The third and the most insidious impact that the narrative around Kashmiri Pandit migration has on Bahujans is that it wants them to believe that somehow they have a common cause with the Kashmiri Pandits and the rest of the Brahmin classes in keeping the occupation of Kashmir going. I would consider it to be the most damaging for such a belief creates a false consciousness among the Bahujan masses with regard to their identification as the occupier class when they as a collectivity or even as singular castes/classes neither have the means nor any real material or ideological interests in partaking the continuing human rights abuses and the occupation of a land which is temporally and geographically completely detached from their everyday realities. This is to say that for Bahujans of India it is a lost cause to battle against Kashmiris for it only strengthens their own oppression back home.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed the construction and perpetuation of Hindu-Muslim binary as a hegemonic discourse. By analysing the migrations of Kashmiri Pandits beginning in 1990, it demonstrates how categorisation around religion proved detrimental for the rights of the marginalised communities and self-determination movements as in Kashmir. The centrality of Kashmiri Pandits to the Kashmir issue and their special treatment and place in the public memory and consciousness is primarily to do with their status as the governing/ruling classes in India. It is in that respect that such a great amount of social, moral and ethical imagination has to be forcefully afforded to a community by the historically disadvantaged

9 See Johar, 2017, 2018.

communities both within and outside Kashmir. The purpose of this forced and curated development of a consciousness that is indicative of a special status for the Brahmin, even in such predominantly non-'Hindu' contexts is telling of the way caste functions in the sub-continental socio-political developments.

In the age of Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp byte size pieces of everything that is digitally consumable, including audio-visual material as well as disjointed excerpts from mostly unreferenced literature on Kashmiri Pandit migration, become sites of social outrage and opinion formation. In a contemporary context the role such purposefully edited snippets have come to play in manipulating and regurgitating opinion does not need much guessing. Its reach is not limited to the Indian masses but is also being employed to influence international perceptions about such localized events with a complex trajectory. Full-fledged organisations with colossal budgets work towards circulating such digital content to potential consumers with the help of social media influencers and by spinning the algorithm that controls the life of a digital item. It is a classic case of how the cultural, social and economic interests of the ruling classes are protected by deploying capital in all its forms. It also demonstrates that the Kashmiri Pandits issue has been forced as a moral obligation and burden in a very strategic manner on the Kashmiri freedom struggle against the Indian state and the Bahujan movements challenging the hegemonic state and ideology, respectively.

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