

## **Return of the Kashmiri Pandits: Need for Inclusive Dialogue**

*In context of contemporary debates about the government's plan to rehabilitate Kashmiri Pandits, this paper presents perspectives on the creation of separate townships, grounding these in the historical context of the Pandits' displacement. Drawing from experience as a member of the community, the author explores the social costs of displacement and argues that policy dialogue must take into account the voices of the community; of those who were displaced, as well as those who chose to remain in Kashmir.*

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The current government's initiatives towards rehabilitating Kashmiri Pandits in their homeland have sparked off numerous debates. The major issue in these debates has been the central government's proposal of creating a separate township for the Pandits who want to settle again in Kashmir. While the return of Pandits to Kashmir has been welcomed by all, the proposal of creating a separate township for the returning Pandits has met with rejection from several groups on different grounds. One group has suggested that this kind of a project might lead to even more crystallization of the differences between the two communities of Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits. Their relationship had suffered a major blow in the 1990s when the Pandits were displaced from Kashmir owing to the insurgency that began in 1989. The Pandits feel that they were betrayed by the Muslims, who they believed enabled their forced displacement from the land that both the communities inhabited. Another group has deemed this proposal a part of the RSS agenda and calls the township an 'Israeli-type settlement'. Amongst the Pandits themselves, those who stayed back in Kashmir after 1990 are also apprehensive about this project. For them, this kind of separation of the returning Pandits and Muslims might lead to an

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environment where mistrust might develop between the communities. The situation thus has become highly complex, and the solution might not become easily evident.

The suffering of the Pandit community has been ignored by various central and state governments. The policymakers, be it of the country or in the state itself have taken Kashmir as just a political issue and have milked it continuously for their own benefits. While the recent proposal for rehabilitating Pandits marks the concern of the government towards this group, the animosity in the responses towards it is quite disheartening. Even as the local Muslim population assures the Pandit community of their safety, and that they don't need separate townships, it is important to understand the perspective of the Pandits who had been displaced. They witnessed a grave threat to their lives in 1990 even though they might have lived harmoniously with the Muslim population before that period. The returning Pandits will certainly want assurance from the local administration that their lives will never be in the same critical and perilous situation again.

Regarding the township being called an Israeli type settlement which apparently will hamper the situation in Kashmir, we must remember that a number of Pandit families in an area would live separately and certain areas were populated with a majority of Pandits. In those times, no one witnessed any grave situation which might have risen because of such separate settlements. It is important that everyone realises that this community was forced to leave from Kashmir in 1990 and would certainly experience insecurities in returning to their homeland.

The opinions of the Pandits living in Kashmir also form a very important part of the response coming from the valley, and their ideas for rehabilitation might help in building a strategy for this process. In the initial years from 1991-1995, the Pandit families who stayed back in Kashmir witnessed incidences of bomb attacks, cross-firings, crackdowns and dissent from the local majority population. However, after that period the conditions in the valley for them slowly started improving as the majority population again accepted them as co-habitants. This is not to say that the Pandits who stayed back lived in a completely secure environment; there were incidences after that period like the Wandhama massacre, when around 23 Kashmiri Pandits living in the village of Wandhama were killed by

terrorists. They have suffered in the turmoil along with the local Muslim population, which has involved continuous killings of innocent individuals. This group has continued to live with the Muslim majority, and carry on with their lives even as a major chunk of their population was forced to leave. They have had regular interaction with the Muslim majority over the years which led to a renewal of trust between the two groups. While the representatives of this group might feel that creating a separate settlement for returning Pandits is not the best idea and it would be better to re-settle them back into their houses, it may not be that practical. A majority of Pandits who left Kashmir sold off their houses and property after 1990 and hence do not have any residence to stay in. Will the state government be able to provide them with proper establishments in the areas where the majority population is already settled in for the past 25 years?

The major concern that the state government and the central government need to keep in mind, is who exactly wants to return to Kashmir. Will the Pandit youth who have already settled outside and are working in well-paying jobs want to return to Kashmir, where economic opportunities might be bleak for them? Personally, I believe it would be people from the older age group who might want to return. This group suffered the most because of the displacement, and would feel deeply insecure in going back to a place where they once faced hostility from the majority population. It would be extremely difficult for them to trust the Muslim population again.

I don't wish to suggest that the rehabilitation process is impossible. It is definitely feasible and it is high time that it should be conducted. What is required is sensitivity from different stakeholders while dealing with this issue. People who think that this will lead to a complete separation should understand that the Pandits will have to come out and have daily interactions with the Muslim population be it in the markets or other social spaces. Returning to a place where they once lived and owned a house which they have lost will be a disturbing experience in itself.

My family and I lost our place of residence in the floods last year. Going back there to pick up what was left was the most challenging and difficult experience of my life. It was then that I understood how the Pandits who were displaced in 1990 would have felt after coming back in later years to see their

house looted and burnt. The feeling of losing a home in a place which you identify as your homeland is the worst feeling of all, and we must keep this in mind while debating the issue.

A major part of the authority in deciding how this process should be carried out should be provided to the Pandits. This should include an interaction between the displaced group and the group which stayed back. The government should hear their concerns, and only then will it be able to reach an informed decision. The displaced Pandits have to be heard, as ultimately it is them who will have to return back to their homeland and live there again. It is important to engage with the Pandits who have stayed back to understand how relations between the two communities can be repaired. This group has the experience of living with the majority group over the years and its views would prove to be fruitful.

In the end as a young member of the community, I can only hope that the future generations of the Pandit community never have to face any fear in staying in their own homeland, and that the relationship between these two religious groups should not face any more setbacks.