

Resilience and Struggle: The Plight of Kashmiri Pandit Women in Exile

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Abstract: *This article delves into the origin, history, and challenges faced by the Kashmiri Pandit community, focusing on the unique struggles of its women in the wake of militancy - induced exile. The text discusses the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and contributions of the community, along with the impact of historic events like Partition and subsequent militant activities. It sheds light on the plight of Kashmiri Pandit women, who have endured displacement, violence, health traumas, and shattered families. The article highlights the psychological and physical toll, including increased stress, manifestations of diseases, premature aging, and decreased fertility rates, experienced by these women. Despite facing immense adversity, the Kashmiri Pandit community remains resilient, fighting for their rights, identity, and a dignified existence.*

Keywords: Kashmiri Pandit community, militancy, exile, women's struggles, health traumas

1. Introduction

Origin of Kashmiri Pandit community covers more than a period of five thousand years. Kashmiri Pandits are Saraswat Brahmins (Dhar T. N, 2003: 11). Kashmir is the land of their ancestors and forefathers. Kashmiri Pandits are a unique set of people and are handsome, civilized, educated, gentle, and with good communicative skill. They are intelligent, and excel in whatever they do; they have a role and a mission given by God. They are like the salt of the earth. They have adopted, Saptarishi Calendar (current year - 5078), and follow rituals formulated by Rishi Logaksha, as against those of Rishi Katyayan followed in other parts of the country (Pandit R S, 1963: 13). Kashmiri Pandits were divided into the astrologer clay (Jotish), the Priest (Guru), and those who follow secular occupations (Karkun). The vast majority of Kashmiri Pandits, who belong to the Karkun category, were salaried state employees in the lower ranges of the administration, while others practice agriculture and related occupations (Kaul RU, 1999: 68).

Their thirst for knowledge is an abiding virtue with them which shall illuminate many minds and societies. In fact, in the 21st century, Saraswati has become Mahalakshmi. Culture and society of these Pandits can further be structured on the values held by the prominent Kashmiri Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (Bhatt, 1995: 217). This community believes in Shiva and Shakti worship and follows Kashmir ShaivaDarshan for spiritual purposes and the Vedas for rituals. Apart from the common festivals and religious functions like Diwali, Dussehra, Ganesh and Lakshmi Pooja, they have some peculiar festivals. The most important of this is Shiva Ratri, a socio - religious function celebrated over a period of a fortnight (the dark fortnight of Falguna of the lunar calendar). The New Year's Day is celebrated on the first day of the Bright fortnight of Chaitra (Ahmed Feroz, 1998: 76).

Odyssey of Kashmiri Pandits

Kashmiri Pandits at no stage of history ceased to make contributions. The gifts supplied to northern India by Haimastavas of Sabhaparvas of Mahabharata included even Kashmiris. They presented silks and woolens. Kashmiri

Pandit monks and missionaries dared the trek across and spread the message of the great Buddha at the cost of their lives. A few of the notables were GautamSangha, Buddhayasas, VimalakshaBuddajiva, ShakyashriBadhra, Ratanvira and ShamaBhatta etc. Even Kumarijiva, referred to in China as "one of the four suns of Buddhism" received education in Buddhist thought and tradition at the hands of Kashmiri scholars (Syed Ali ShaGilani, 2002: 9).

It was he who, along with a group of Kashmiri Pandit Scholars made Kucha a seat of Buddhist learning in Central Asia. Kashmir once represented a laboratory in which Buddhist thought and philosophy were dissected at the hands of learned Kashmiri Pandit scholars. It attracted chain of scholar - pilgrims from distant lands (Kapur M L, 1983: 19 - 20). HuenTsiang, Che - mong, Fa - yong, and Qu - kong all visited Kashmir to study Sanskrit and Buddhist philosophy. Kanishka chose it as the proud place for a Buddhist conference. The philosophical thought which Kashmiri Pandit scholars propounded and advocated was ever - evolving and growing. At the end of Eighth Century Buddhism in Kashmir lost its glory and the new thought of "Advaita" of Sankaracharya made an impact, Kashmiri scholars gave monastic interpretation to Saivism in Kashmir (Bhattacharjea Ajith, 1994: 127 - 128). Kashmir Shaivism is possibly the most rational, logical and pragmatic science of spirituality propagated anywhere in the world. Instead of saying that the world is illusory, it declares emphatically that the world is as real as God. Kashmiri Pandits culture includes festivals, language, cuisine, rituals, music, literature and customs. They preserve distinct cultural identity, document it, and practice it, pass it on to their children, and are proud of it. They patronize artists and writers, buy their books and tapes, go and watch them or listen to them and encourage them with acclaim and recognition (Prem Shankar jha, 1996: 82).

Pandits become victims of Militancy

Militancy destroyed life of Kashmiri Pandits. After the independence Pakistan send tribal peoples to grab Kashmir with the help of its army. It created so much of conflicts and disputes between both nations. In 1989 militancy conducted massive attacks against minority Pandits. Fundamentalist

stole their land and homes, even right to life also. The five thousand old Saraswath Brahmin communities had lost their traditions, customs and civilizations. Pandit communities are in exile. They are getting some subsidies and financial helps from authorities. But they had lost their freedom. Militancy had badly affected the life of pandit woman's. They are living in two room tin shaded camps. Physically and mentally they are weak. Their children become the victims of great fear. Family envisages are broken, not getting proper education, all basic facilities are denied due to militancy. Pandit woman had lost their valuable dreams and hopes about family (Pant Kusum, 2009: 57).

Pandit women in Exile

The Kashmiri Pandit Women, who have entered the twenty fourth year in exile, appeal to the conscience of the civilized world to grasp the grim tragedy that has kept the Kashmiri Pandit women in exile. The worst victims were the women. The grave human tragedy began with religious persecution and genocide, kidnappings and a spare of killings, torture, rape, murder and molestation of women, even little children and young girls were not spared. The communal carnage, the forced exodus, the changed milieu, alien and hostile environment, along with a torn social fabric, poor shelter, lack of privacy and security have resulted in serious health traumas. One hundred per cent of the exiled Kashmiri Pandit Women are affected with health syndromes. The old and the infirm have met a premature death, dying for want of health and family support. A large number have suffered mental breakdown due to the stress, terror, violence and genocide (Nelson Thomas, 2000, 109 - 110).

The genocide has badly affected Pandit women. Many women become the victim of panic problems like mental and physical disorders, depression problems and anxiety disorders. It is observed that many women are using toxic medicines for deep sleep in order to save them from sleepless nights (Data collected from Medical Rehabilitation Department, Jammu).

The most alarming phenomenon has been a very high occurrence of ovarian failure and premature menopause leading to greatly reduced fertility span, resulting in a negative growth. This has been further accentuated by a high death rate, unnatural deaths, premature aging, low birth rate due to contraception, elective abortion, late marriages, sexual deprivation due to stress and lack of privacy, reduced desire and therefore reduced conception. 400 consecutive females with menopausal symptoms in exile were compared with equal number who developed menopause before exile. More than a third (36%) of females is infertile by the time they reach 40 years age in exile (Data collected from Jammu, Medical Rehabilitation Centre).

High divorce rate in exile

Marriages are arranged by families. Sub caste endogamy is a prescription, and within the sub caste the rule of gotra exogamy is normally observed. The preferred type of marriage is between completely unrelated families. Bride givers accept a deferential role for themselves and offer dowry to bride takers. Owing to the shortage of women, however, Marriages by exchange between bride givers and takers, though not well thought of, are about as frequent as

the favored type of marriage. Very rarely a man may buy himself a wife, but such an arrangement is never publicly acknowledged (Amy Waldan, 2002: 169).

Traditionally widows did not remarry but in the last couple of generations some cases of widow remarriage have occurred, involving particularly young childless widows. Girls leave their parental home on marriage and go to live with the husband and his parents. If the husband is employed away from home, the bride begins her life as a married woman by living with her parents - in - law for about a year before joining her husband, who may however visit her at home. Occasionally, when a couple has no sons, they may arrange for their daughter (or one of their daughters, if there are several) to marry patriuxorilocally. Her husband then comes to live with his parents - in - law and looks after them. Since Pandits consider marriage a sacrament, the notion of divorce is absent.

The matrimonial court records also show the unprecedented trend in marriage disputes among Kashmiri Pandit community. Out of over 1200 cases registered by court, 430 have been initiated by Kashmiri Pandits in the year 2007. Maximum number of couples that approached the court for divorce is in the age group of 24 - 40 years. It is the children in the family who have to suffer. Children become the scapegoat due to the dispute between parents. They are dragged to court for no fault of theirs. Their future has been put at stake (Tikko Ramesh, 2006: 32 - 33).

Environmental Disorders

Environmental problems badly affected against pandit woman's. Heat - related syndrome likes Heat strokes, Heat exhaustion, Cramps, Dehydration, Solar exposures, Sunburns, solar dermatitis, Solar pigmentation, Predator attacks, snake bites, scorpion bites. Air bore diseases of Allergic syndromes new antigens in the environment pollen, parthenium or congress agrass etc. Respiratory infections like tuberculosis, bronchitis, and pneumonia, Skin infestations Scabies, fungi, yeast, boils abscesses, Water borne diseases (water supply of the camps contaminated with effluent and waste), Hepatitis, diarrhea, dysentery, amoebiasis, giardiasis, typhoid etc (Data collected from various migrants camps).

All these factors leads to the release of hormones and chemicals in the body with deleterious consequences on the organ systems giving rise to numerous stress syndromes, both mental and physical. The visit of all Pandit camps in J&K states revealed that still they are living fearful conditions. Terror and violence damaged their individuality and their dignity. Most of the woman are not interested to talk about their health conditions; they suffer alienation. Central or State governments are not providing sufficient healing measures to Pandit woman.

Manifestation of Disease

Stress Syndromes affected woman's future

In all the migrant camps there were persons with cases of Cardio Vascular Stress Hypertension, Coronary artery disease - angina and heart attacks. According to state medical reports Hypertension created problems in hearts and

it leads to heart disease. In Purkhoo camp, Jihri camp and Mishriwala camp, the migrants revealed that In 2008 - 2009 they lost more than 248 lives due to these diseases.

- Psycho trauma: The genocide of the Pandits leads to anxiety, panic attacks and depression, post - traumatic stress syndrome, sleep disorders and nightmares etc.
- Endocrine stress: The exiled Pandits became victims of Stress Diabetes, thyroid disorders, ovarian failure leading to premature menopause problems.

Stress (Epidemic) Diabetes

Over all Incidences in refugee females 14.2 % (below 30 years) 6%, (31 - 45 years) 18% are facing stress problems. The important causes are Stress – physical (hyperkinetic stress) and mental, Urbanization and lifestyle changes due to exile.

Climatic unmaking of incipient diabetes – sweet and sugared drinks to fight off heat and exhaustion, Candida infections and boils, preoccupation with health (life is all that is left and to which we cling hard) Awareness of diabetes, detection drive, Genetic predilection (Data Collected from migrant Pandits).

High death rate

Premature ageing and premature death, Unnatural death, High incidence of serious and potentially fatal diseases, Affliction with Multiple disease syndromes, Poor medical aid, Economic bankruptcy, all leads to lack of desire to live.

Low birth rate

Pandits woman remained family planning enthusiasts with one or two child. Exile has brought it to one or none, Late marriage, late conception, Premature menopause and reduced fertility span, diminished libido and hypo - sexuality of exile, Forced celibacy and sexual deprivation, Contraception, Elective abortion (Data collected from Survey).

Kasmir militancy destroyed their everlasting hopes and soul. All militants goroups try to destroyed there invisages about family. Woman and children are the worst victims of Pakistans sponsored militancy. State health department is not implementing any projects for depressed, silent, poor kashmiri pandit woman's future.

2. Conclusion

The pathos of the Kashmiri Pandit community's experience especially that of its women, remains a tragic chapter in the region's history. Their displacement and subsequent hardships continue to pose challenges that transcend mere physical displacement. The resilience exhibited by these women amid their unrelenting struggle for survival, dignity, and identity serves as a poignant reminder of the profound human cost borne by communities caught in the throes of conflict. As the community strives for justice, recognition, and a return to its roots, it is imperative that efforts are made at national and international levels to address the multifaceted challenges faced by these resilient women and pave the way for a more inclusive and harmonious future.

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