

## **Burning Homes and the Silent State: The Traumatic Past and an Uncertain Present of the Kashmiri Pandits in *Our Moon has Blood Clots***

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### **Abstract**

Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon has Blood Clots* (2013) is a testimony to the brutalities and atrocities inflicted on the minority community of pandits in the last decade of twentieth century by the majority Muslims in Kashmir. Marginalised and reduced to being refugees in their own country as a result of suffering antipathy from their own neighbours and friends, the community mostly suffered due to the indifference of the state. The violence meted out on pandits in order to terrorise and force them out of the land which belonged to them as much as it belonged to the fellow Muslims was patterned and had its precedents in early acts of violence against the Kashmiri Pandits including the tribal invasion of 1947.

Besides shedding light upon the themes of homelessness, identity, trauma, ethnic cleansing and many others, Pandita's memoir can be seen as an assertion of identity in the times when the state has pushed the related concerns into oblivion and seems to have turned a blind eye to the atrocities against Pandits. The memoir also succinctly associates the increasing fundamentalism in the Muslim Community and their infiltration from neighbouring countries as a consequence of emergence of fundamentalism in Afghanistan during and after its war against Soviet Russia. The paper shall elaborate upon these premises to unravel the political undercurrents in Rahul Pandita's poignant memoir.

**Keywords:** Kashmiri Pandits, fundamentalism, infiltration, memoir, marginalised, ethnic cleansing

The tomatoes were running out, and many people were still waiting. They had begun to give only three tomatoes to each person. In a few minutes it was reduced to one tomato per person. A man in the queue objected to two people from the same family queuing up. 'I have ten mouths to feed,' said one. An old woman intervened. 'Do we have to fight over a few tomatoes now?' she asked. After that, there was silence.

By the time our turn came, and it came in a matter of minutes, it was clear that not everyone would get tomatoes. One of the men distributing them procured a rusty knife. They began to cut the tomatoes into half and give them away. I thought I was hallucinating. (Pandita 3)

Rahul Pandita delineates a poignant picture of the life in refugee camps of Jammu where the legitimate citizens of the state were forced to live despite having all the luxuries available to them back at home which were supposedly captured, deserted or demolished by the perpetrators. The war cry "*Raliv, Chaliv, ya Galiv* (Be one among us, flee, or be decimated)" were rallied against the minority pandits and their mass persecution became a common occurrence in the Valley. The event not only had severe social, political and economic repercussions but also left an indelible blot on the democratic system of the nation. The ripples of the fateful event of January 1990 are being felt across the Indian continent even in the present times giving rise to several conflicting narratives and thus, mirroring the social schism even in the academics.

Several writers have attempted to narrate the tales, based on their own experiences or others', from the Valley, in different genres but the inconclusive dispute of narratives has not begotten anything worthwhile. Though the entire cornucopia of deliberations might sometimes confound one, they also facilitate the process of analysis and understanding. Therefore, to say that Rahul Pandita's memoir, *Our Moon has Blood Clots*, plays a significant part in understanding the past and present situation in the valley is not without credentials. The memoir does not only describe the events of January 1990 and its effects but also goes back and forth in time to outline the growth of crisis. The technique of tale-within-a-tale is employed in order to portray the series of traumatic experiences that the Pandits in the Valley bore, especially during the tribal invasion of 1947. The focus for the most part, however, is around the exodus that rendered lakhs of people homeless. The themes of death, migration, identity crisis, homelessness, ethnic cleansing among others are dominant all through the memoir.

Identity crisis ensuing from the sense of lost home is also accompanied by the optimism that the return to the homeland is contemplated as a future possibility by many. Pandita's mother's consistent refrain "Our home in Kashmir had twenty-two rooms" on various occasions, in front of her acquaintances, neighbours, friends and relatives, can be assumed to be a coping method for evading the bitterness of the present. The soothing remembrance of the affluent home in Kashmir and the hope of return help ameliorate the trauma of the present. With a series of settlement and resettlement to finally moving to Delhi, perhaps, she might have realised that the prospective return was never possible yet she consciously suppressed her fears with her constant reiterations. The idea of having lost even the hope of returning home where she grew up suggested a complete disconnect from her roots and would have had a devastating effect. Pandita acknowledges that the refrain which had become her "personal anthem for more than a decade" helped in reminding her of "who she was" (10-11).

The mournful undertone of the loss of the feeling of *Kashmiriyat* pervades in the writing. Though Pandita is someone who celebrates *Kashmiriyat* and describes the ways in which he found the intermingling between both the communities on several occasions, the incident he mentions from his schooldays defies any claim as such or at least proves that hatred had taken over the pretences of affection. There are several writers who have opined in tune with Pandit on the matter of *Kashmiriyat* but Raina claims that *Kashmiriyat* has been a myth propagated by those whose interests lied with the majority of Jammu and Kashmir. He writes,

Not found in any written account or even any speech prior to Indira-Sheikh Accord (1975), the term is referred to many as the traditional way of Kashmiri life through the millennium! It was, in fact, invented by Sheikh Abdullah's party and it is not uncommon to see top leadership of the country endorsing the term that, when analysed, means a way of living within Muslim majoritarianism inside Kashmir! (Raina 18)

But of several varying opinions on *Kashmiriyat*, those which speak of faith in the idea and hope of reconciliation are plentiful. The layers of misunderstanding resulting from various factors and communication gap, as many believe, between those at different helms in Kashmir has led to a crisis of *Kashmiriyat*. The snow-clad Valley consequently lost its beauty and was painted with the redness of blood and hatred of her sons and daughters. The radicalisation of Islam in the valley was not just monitored by Pakistan but many among them crossed borders for training. The infiltration of weapons and Kalashnikovs through the borders helped in catalysing the moment.

While there is no denying the fact that radical Islam is being supported and financed in a structured way, and the counternarrative of *Kashmiriyat* has weakened, there is enough evidence to support that *Kashmiriyat* is dormant but not dead. (Dhar 157)

The memoir is replete with such instances where the ominous shadow of separatist ideology has overtaken the oft-celebrated *Kashmiriyat*. Religion had become paramount and the *kafirs* were to be wiped off entirely. Ashok Dhar recalls the slogans which were common in the Valley during those days,

*Kashir banawon Pakistan, Bataw varai, Batneiw saan*

[We will turn Kashmir into Pakistan along with Kashmiri Pandit women, but without their menfolk.]

*People's League ka kya paigam, Fateh, Azadi aur Islam*

[What is the message of People's League? Victory, Freedom and Islam.] (Dhar 138)

The pro-Pakistan stance of the separatists were found loud and clear in their slogans. These aggressive utterances were meant to create psychological effect and intimidate the minority community. Not just with regard to slogans, but when it came to other concerns too, they knew whom they wished to align with: "By 1986, forced blackouts were the norm in the Valley on India's Independence Day. In some places, if India won a cricket match against Pakistan, a stone could crash through one's windowpane and land in the bedroom" (Pandita 53). The complete disregard of history when Maharaja Hari Singh and others considered it lucrative to accede to Indian continent and with no sense of pride for one's nation, the separatists wished to forge a union with the Muslim majority Pakistan, unheeding of the means they had chosen. Mass persecutions and brutal killings of the Kashmiri pandits became the norm while "the state radio and television carried no news reports" of the same (Pandita 89). Understood to be the representatives of the opponent state, the people in media, judiciary and bureaucracy were being assassinated in an attempt to induce fear among the general mass. The feeble system stared in the oblivion while the exodus happened. The devastated pandits in their quest for safety just wished "to go somewhere where there would be no slogans, no loudspeakers, no fists and middle fingers raised at us [them], no hit lists, no Kalashnikovs, no freedom songs (Pandita 99). Mass killings took place even when pandits were found escaping the state. In order to conceal their identities, Pandita writes, "Ma had removed the golden *atth* from her ears and her *bindi* that identified her as a Pandit. Father removed the red sacred thread from his wrist" (94).

The terrorists had resorted to different tactics of intimidations. The object was to force the pandits into leaving the valley or cleansing the valley of them. The religious persecution began systematically by calling out the pandits to leave the valley and threatening them from mosques. It was planned such that thousands of mosques would begin the rallying cry together in order to cause more fear and threat. Though it began on January 19, 1990, thereafter, it became a pattern for the Kashmiris.

The slogans and the war cries from the mosque did not stop. So, in a way, every day in Kashmir after January 19 was January 19. The cries just became a little more systematic. They would begin during the night and continue till the wee hours of the morning. After a break, they would resume until late morning. Then another break and so it would go on. (Pandita 80)

The killings and violence was systematically carried out. Their strategy was to force the pandits into leaving valley by inducing fear in them. The terrorists would kill one to threaten several. Intimidation was, therefore, a strategy. Pandita provides an insight into the psychology of killing,

Throughout 1990, Pandits are picked up selectively and put to death. They are killed because Kashmir needs to be cleansed of them. And if the one chosen is not to be found, a proxy suffices. It is all about numbers. It is all about how many are killed. It is known that if one among them is killed, a thousand will flee. (72)

Even the young Muslim friends of Pandita were not untouched by the influence of conflict and hatred. He heard his teenager friends speak of him and his neighbours disparagingly. They rejoiced the idea of ousting the Pandits from their homes and capturing their possessions and pandit women.

*Near the main gate below, there is a gang of boys. Some of them are smoking. I know most of them. They are boys from our neighbourhood – near and far – and I have played cricket with some of them....*

*‘Let’s distribute these houses,’ one of them shouts. ‘Akram, which one do you want?’ he asks.*

*‘I would settle for this house any day,’ he points to a house.*

*‘Bastard,’ shoots back another, ‘how you wish you could occupy this house with their daughter!’*

*There is a peal of laughter. They make obscene gestures with their fists and Akram pretends as if he is raping the girl and is now close to an orgasm. (Pandita 90-1)*

Pandita's memoir also counters the fake narratives which were conveniently built to safeguard the interests of the separatists. The author attempts to counter the narrative which blames the then governor Jagmohan and exonerates him of the baseless accusations of being complicit in the exodus of pandits.

A series of untruths have been spoken so many times that they have almost become the truth. One major truth is that the Pandits were made to leave Kashmir under a government design to discredit the Kashmiri secessionist movement. One of the scapegoats chosen for this untruth was the former governor of the state, Jagmohan. (Pandita 219)

At the same time, Rahul Pandita criticises the indifferent government whose personal interests far outweighed the interests of the Kashmiri Pandits. In the month of March of the same year, “...a multi-party political delegation led by the former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi arrived

in Kashmir to take stock of the situation. But the former prime minister had arrived with the sole purpose of creating an unnecessary fuss” making complaints about the violation of protocols rather than heeding to the matter of concern at hand. Moreover, “[t]he delegation, which included stalwarts like George Fernandes and Harkishan Singh Surjeet, skipped Jammu altogether to escape the wrath of the Pandits who had already fled their homes and were now refugees in their own country” (Pandita 89). Apparently, the politicians paid a courteous visit, driven more out of their political interests than the interest of people which elected them. Kashmiri Pandits suffered in silence because their voices did not receive proper outlets to be expressed. From the government, to the media houses and even the intellectuals of the nation chose silence and deserted the minorities of Kashmir.

Another problem is the apathy of the media and a majority of India’s intellectual class who refuse to even acknowledge the suffering of the Pandits. No campaigns were ever run for us; no fellowships or grants given for research on our exodus. For the media, the Kashmir issue remained largely black and white – here are a people who are victims of brutalization at the hands of the Indian state. But the media has failed to see, and has largely ignored the fact that the same people also victimised another people. (Pandita 220)

Apart from some unwarranted resignations, the system brooded passively on the fate of Pandits who were forced to become refugees in their own country for no constructive actions and no accountability were taken to ensure their safety or reestablishment. Some refugee camps were set up where they lived in destitution and penury. A meagre monthly allowance was fixed which hardly served to ensure their survival, forget about education and other requirements. The government provided them some facilities for securing political leverage for themselves and left the victims to attend to themselves. By 2011, however, Pandita notes, the camps were done away with and the inhabitants were “shifted to a refugees settlement on the outskirts of Jammu city” where they faced “acute power and water shortage” and the meagre amount that the “non-salaried refugee families receive[d]” had not been increased for a long time. He further states, “[t]here is no provision for sewage disposal in the settlement. The bodies of those who die have to be taken to Jammu since there is no provision for a cremation ground here” (237, 239).

But it is not just “the lack of basic amenities in the camp” that perturbs the inhabitants. Away from their proper homes and forced to live the life of an underprivileged, they are insecure even in “their workplaces where they face acute harassment from their Muslim colleagues” (Pandita 247). Those who were fortunate enough to migrate and search for a home elsewhere, they might have left the spectre of the past behind but with that also their roots, their traditions, their culture and probably, also a part of themselves. Pandita expresses his regret at the loss of tradition among his people and the link to the place of origin. This loss, he asserts, “is evident during weddings, or when someone dies.” Traditions are forgotten and the ‘self’ is gradually eroding or is facing a dilemma away from its roots (211). However, this identity crisis is pervasive with all the victims. In one of the interactions with Pandita, a woman confesses, “[e]ach day we leave behind something of our identity”. Everything that the Kashmiri Pandits came to associate themselves with was either taken away or was threatened. The woman continues further, “[y]esterday, it was the freedom to sing the National Anthem; today it is the freedom to wear a bindi; tomorrow it could be our faith” (250). The national identity, the religious identity and the ‘self’ have to be compromised for survival.

The religious fanaticism and radicalisation threw the Valley in the throes of consistent grief and pain. The future of the Kashmiri Pandits in and around Jammu remains uncertain with no significant deliberations in that direction. The homelessness becomes even more prominent due to the fact that “[b]y 1992, the locks of most Pandit houses had been broken”, or they had been occupied by others as was Pandita’s house as he discovered when he made a visit to his home after years, and “[m]any houses were burnt down” (Pandita 142). The Kashmiri Pandits were, therefore, permanently uprooted. The terrorists and militants are still active in the Valley and so is the army in order to bring about peace. Thus, Pandita rightly observes that “[t]he guns are never silenced after the September of 1989” (73).

The Kashmir crisis, however, has emerged as one of the most contentious issue in the present times. There is a web of narratives and several versions of truth. In the ever-evolving world where multiple truths exist simultaneously, a more severe war of narratives has occupied the academia. Dhar cautions regarding the role of social media and information and technology stating that “young militants are using social media to increase their following and organize mass protests” (153). He further states,

Besides easy information on the Internet, another key factor responsible for growing Islamic radicalization has been the decrease in the practice of Sufi Islam, the traditional form of religious practice in this region, and the growing congregations of the Wahhabi ideology. (Dhar 155)

At the same time, Chitrlekha Zutshi turns a blind eye towards the sufferings of Kashmiri pandits and sees India’s response to terrorism in Valley as one which “transformed” it “into a landscape of horrors, pockmarked with military encampments, army convoys, weapons caches, shuttered cinema halls and restaurants, buildings wrapped in barbed wire, and shattered bodies” utterly ignoring the past in which a minority community was brutally killed and forced to live as refugee in its own nation (156). In the similar vein, Freny Manecksha evades the discussion on Kashmiri Pandit women and visualises the military as an oppressor of women and children in the valley. Therefore, the Kashmiri Pandits have not only been victimised by radical fanatics and terrorists but also by the indifference of the state, neglect by the media and dissimulation of the intellectuals.

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