

Retelling the Tragic Story of Kashmiri Pandits

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[Twenty-five years is a long time. But we must not allow the tragedy of Kashmiri Pandits forced into exile in their own country to disappear from popular memory. Never forget, never forgive]

Twenty-five years is a long time, it's quarter of a century. So it's not surprising that popular memory of a tragedy that occurred 25 years ago should have, over the decades, turned sepia. In another 25 years that memory will begin to fray at the edges and over the next 25 years it will crumble into indistinguishable bits and pieces.

A hundred years later, the tragedy will become a footnote of history and elicit, at best, passing interest among a curious few. And so shall a human tragedy of unimaginable proportion be reduced to a few words, a cursory reference to an event among many others that occurred in this wondrous land of ours.

Yet it would be a crime to allow some tragedies to fade from popular memory.

The Jews who lived through the horrors of the Holocaust, surviving the Nazi death camps and Adolf Hitler's 'Final Solution', are either dead or dying of old age. Films and books on Hitler's atrocities and Nazi war crimes are no longer fashionable, thanks to the wretched political correctness of the perpetually guilt-ridden and the rage of the perpetually aggrieved. **But Jews have not allowed the Holocaust to fade from popular memory.**

The two words, '**Never Again**', mean a lot more than a slogan scrawled on a t-shirt. *They mean that a community acts in a collective manner to ensure that the horrors inflicted on it are not repeated ever again — not on them, not on others. That collective response is essentially about keeping memories alive — the darkest of them are preserved with the greatest care. To forget and, worse, to forgive, is tantamount to defacing history and belittling the sufferings of victims while exonerating their tormentors.*

And so it is that we must never forget the tragedy that befell the Pandits of Kashmir this month 25 years ago.

Tens of thousands of them were forced into exile in their own country after being terrorized out of their home and hearth in their ancient land by murderous, rapacious Islamic terrorists. They have not been allowed to return. *The repugnant cleansing of Kashmir Valley to make it a Muslim-only province* began with that act of barbaric cruelty. The story of the Kashmiri Pandits is not their story alone. It is the story of all Indians. It is a story for Hindus to remember and retell. Here's what happened 25 years ago.

Srinagar, January 4, 1990.

Aftab, a local Urdu newspaper, publishes a Press release issued by Hizb-ul Mujahideen, set up by the Jamaat-e-Islami in 1989 to wage *jihad* for Jammu & Kashmir's secession from India and accession to Pakistan, asking all Hindus to pack up and leave.

Another local paper, *Al Safa*, repeats this expulsion order.

In the following days, there is near chaos in Kashmir Valley **with Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah and his National Conference Government abdicating all responsibilities of the State**. Masked men run amok, waving Kalashnikovs, shooting to kill and shouting anti-India slogans.

Reports of killing of Hindus, invariably Kashmiri Pandits, begin to trickle in; there are explosions; inflammatory speeches are made from the pulpits of mosques, using public address systems meant for calling the faithful to prayers. **A terrifying fear psychosis begins to take grip of Kashmiri Pandits.**

Walls are plastered with posters and handbills, summarily ordering all Kashmiris to strictly follow the Islamic dress code, prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcoholic drinks and imposing a ban on video parlors and cinemas. **The masked men with Kalashnikovs force people to re-set their watches and clocks to Pakistan Standard Time.**

Shops, business establishments and homes of Kashmiri Pandits, the original inhabitants of the Kashmir valley with a recorded cultural and civilizational history dating back 5,000 years, are marked out. Notices are pasted on doors of Pandit houses, peremptorily asking the occupants to leave Kashmir within 24 hours or face death and worse. **Some are more lucid: "Be one with us, run, or die!"**

Srinagar, January 19, 1990.

Jagmohan arrives to take charge as Governor of Jammu & Kashmir. **Farooq Abdullah, whose pathetic, whimpering, sniveling Government has all but ceased to exist and has gone into hiding, resigns and goes into a sulk.** Curfew is imposed as a first measure to restore some semblance of law and order. But it fails to have a deterrent effect.

Throughout the day, the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front and Hizbul Mujahideen terrorists use public address systems at mosques to exhort people to defy curfew and take to the streets. Masked men, firing from their Kalashnikovs, march up and down, terrorizing cowering Pandits who, by then, have locked themselves in their homes.

As evening falls, the exhortations become louder and shriller. **Three taped slogans are repeatedly played the whole night from mosques:**

‘Kashmir *mei* agar rehna hai, Allah-O-Akbar kehna hai’ (If you want to stay in Kashmir, you have to say Allah-O-Akbar);

‘Yahan kya chalega, Nizam-e-Mustafa’ (What do we want here? Rule of Shariah);

‘Asi gachchi Pakistan, Batao roas te batanev san’ (We want Pakistan along with Hindu women, but without their men).

The Pandits are acutely aware that in the previous months at least 300 of them have been killed by the foot soldiers of the separatists. With no Government worth its name, the administration having collapsed and disappeared, the police nowhere to be seen, despondency sets in. As the night of January 19, 1990, wears itself out, despondency gives way to desperation.

And tens of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits across the valley take a painful decision: to flee their homeland to save their lives from rabid *jihadis*. Thus takes place a 20th century Exodus.

Srinagar, January 19, 2015.

There are no Kashmiri Pandits in Srinagar, or, for that matter, anywhere else in Kashmir valley; they don’t live here anymore. You can find them in squalid

refugee camps in Jammu and in tenements in Delhi. The better off among them have migrated to other cities, some have set up home in Western shores, others have watched their lives fall apart.

Many of them, once prosperous and proud of their rich heritage, now live in groveling poverty, dependent on dole and charity. *In these 25 years, an entire generation of exiled Kashmiri Pandits has grown up, without seeing the land from where their parents fled the shadow of death cast by the terrorist's gun.*

And thereby hangs the tragic tale of the Kashmiri Pandits. An entire people have been uprooted from the land of their ancestors and left to fend for themselves. A part of India's cultural heritage has been destroyed; a chapter of India's civilizational history has been erased.

Had this tragedy occurred elsewhere in Hindu majority India, and had the victims been Muslims, we would have described it as 'ethnic cleansing' and 'genocide'. We would have made films with horror-inducing titles. We would have filed cases in the Supreme Court of India. Our media would have marshalled remarkable rage in reporting the smallest detail.

But, this tragedy has occurred in Muslim majority Kashmir Valley, and the victims are all Hindus, that too Pandits. What has been lost is part of India's Hindu culture, what has been erased is integral to India's Hindu civilization and identity.

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