



# Indo-American Kashmir Forum

Vijay K. Sazawal, Ph.D.  
National President  
vks@KashmirForum.com

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Dr. Manmohan Singh  
Prime Minister  
Republic of India  
7, Race Course Road  
New Delhi 110 011  
INDIA

Dear Prime Minister,

I am very thankful to you for having taken the time on January 18, 2006 to hear my views on the subject of Jammu and Kashmir in general, and on the plight of Kashmiri Pandits (KP) in particular. I am in touch with all major KP organizations in the Valley, Jammu and elsewhere, as well as with many Kashmiri Muslim leaders who have indicated a desire to engage in a civil dialogue with our community. The perspective that I provided in my brief meeting with you was an amalgam of that feedback as well as my personal assessment as an analyst and a historian.

I am particularly grateful to you for having met with Pandits in the Valley, followed by a visit to the Muthi refugee camp in Jammu, in October 2004. I know that the State bureaucracy is finally getting its grip on completing the 2-room hutments this year.

Your initiative to meet with all sections of the Kashmiri society, including Pandits, is a welcome step that means a lot to our community. On behalf of the Hindu Welfare Society Kashmir (HWSK) leadership, which had planned to join me during the January 18 meeting at your official residence, I thank you for having extended this offer to *Valley-based* Pandits, who unfortunately could not make it to New Delhi on account of heavy snowfall in the Valley that prevented their departure. I hope that you will have meetings with representatives from HWSK and other Pandit organizations in the near future.

Various relief measures taken by the current and past governments in New Delhi to alleviate the pain and suffering of displaced Kashmiri Pandits are welcome gestures, but as I explained during our meeting, such measures by themselves do not address strategic needs of the community nor its long-term survival in the

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14015 Hartley Hall Place, Darnestown, MD 20874  
Phone 202.468.7222 ♦ Fax 301.208.0743



Valley. The financial assistance program undertaken by the Center, being disconnected from the J&K official budget is an entitlement program that will discourage, not encourage, assimilation of displaced Pandits back into Kashmir's economy. Instead of an ad hoc entitlement program funded by the Central government directly, the program of rehabilitation and return of Kashmiri Pandits should be made part of the State budget and one its top political and economic priorities. As the Pandits' share of State jobs, educational berths in professional colleges and other opportunities dwindle, more Pandits will leave rather than return to the Valley. This is borne out by data collected from government sources – the Pandit population reduced from 350,000 in 1989 to about 18,000 in 1997 and is down to about 8,000 today. And more will leave if the Central government does not fully comprehend the gravity of the situation quickly.

There will not be any meaningful return of displaced Pandits to the Valley until the displaced community sees improvement in the condition of Pandits living in the Valley today. This is the biggest confidence building measure (CBM) that the State government can offer to stimulate the return of Pandits, but has not done so. Rehabilitation of Pandits has not been a priority issue for previous State governments, and we hope that the new government led by Mr. Azad will take a fresh look at the problem and be more sensitive and accommodating in addressing the plight of Pandits both inside and outside of the Valley.

Closely related to the above point is the fact that return and rehabilitation of displaced Kashmiri Pandits includes much more than providing them with safe segregated housing at various locations in the State. Such a public hoopla was cleverly devised by prior State governments to obfuscate the real issues surrounding the return of displaced Pandits that deal more with economic, social and political well being of the minority community within the Valley.

The "core issue" facing Pandits today is the one of loss of identity in the Valley. The focus of the central assistance to Pandits must shift from short-term financial benefits to strategic measures that create "political and economic space" for Pandits to survive in the Valley. Even with improving safety climate, the long-term viability of Pandits in the Valley is impossible without institutional and constitutional changes in J&K, including passage of enabling legislation in the State Assembly that creates an affirmative program for Pandits and guarantees their place as an "equity partner" in the future of the State. The reluctance of the State political establishment to effect such a change is obvious from the fact that even though the last three successive Chairpersons of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) have recommended that Pandits be given a "Minority status," both previous Chief Ministers (Dr. Abdullah and Mr. Mufti) conveniently chose to ignore such rulings. This is where the Central government can make its mark, and given today's political situation where the State and the Central government are in harmony, there is not a moment to lose.



Finally, our community has been put in a unique and unfortunate situation where the civil society in India practically turned its back on its misfortunes during the grim period (1989-1990) and has mostly ignored its plight these days. Therefore, Pandits have taken on themselves to look at creative ways to engage Kashmiri Muslims in a civil dialogue as a step towards restoring pluralistic and multi-religious identity in the Valley. Initial public statements from Valley Muslims appeared very positive and we developed a comprehensive roadmap for such a dialogue. But increasingly it is becoming obvious that the majority community, having taken the cue from State officialdom, is mostly interested in "meet and greet" events in the Valley, Jammu and elsewhere. They have shied away from serious intra-community dialogue, which is another way of recognizing the degree of impediments that exist in improving the condition of Pandits in the Valley and for those willing to return. We will continue to reach out to the majority community, but I do not believe a change will occur until the State government and its senior bureaucrats demonstrate their willingness to address issues faced by Pandits today.

Again, I thank you for taking the time to see me and for expressing your solidarity with Kashmiri Pandits. I hope that you will follow-up with Mr. Azad on issues that I brought to your attention during the meeting which I have summarized in this letter. Time is running out if we are serious about the return of Pandits to the Valley. A generation has been lost in the seventeen years that Pandits have spent in uncertainty and agony. I am appealing to you and the Congress Party to recognize the gravity of the situation and do whatever is possible in fulfilling hopes and aspirations of my community. Pandits will surely survive wherever they will end up, but a lot more needs to be done if they have to survive in the land of their forefathers. This is the single biggest issue facing my community today.

With my highest regards,

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Vijay K. Sazawal".

Vijay K. Sazawal  
International Coordinator and President  
Indo-American Kashmir Forum  
Washington, DC



Additional Distribution:

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