

Brown urges Hillary to take note of Kashmiri Pandits' plight



Senator
Sherrod Brown

LARRY DOWNING/REUTERS

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IN WASHINGTON, DC

United States Senator Sherrod Brown, recently wrote to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, urging her to discuss the plight of Kashmiri Pandits with the Indian government, particularly during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's November 24 visit to the US.

The Ohio Democrat wrote: 'The plight of displaced Pandits of the Kashmir region of India is a pressing issue that, tragically, has received little attention in recent years.'

Acknowledging that 'the United States has welcomed efforts by India and Pakistan to maintain peace... during the current-turbulent period in Pakistan,' he said the Obama administration should also make the Pandits' problems part of the negotiations.

Brown pointed out that 'most Kashmiri Pandits were driven out of their native land in the early 1990s,' and that the few that remain in the Kashmir valley 'face violence and oppression as a disenfranchised minority. Only a few thousand Pandits are left in the valley today as most have moved to safe havens in other parts of India.'

He wrote, 'While some experts have argued that the Pandit culture will remain vibrant in these relocation areas, every culture is reliant on its native land. If Pandits cannot return to their native territory, Pandit culture, as we know it today, may be lost forever.'

future with the Indian government and sought that 'any agreement reached between and among the United States, India, and Pakistan must call for the preservation of Pandit culture and empower and encourage those living in refugee camps to return to their native land.'

He sought measures going beyond employment and housing, asking for commitment by the state government 'to create political and social space in the valley to ensure a vibrant Pandit culture.'

'Raising these issues during the upcoming State visit of the Indian prime minister, including pushing for Pandit participation in ongoing peace talks, will help ensure that the Pandits remain an integral part of the Kashmir valley's future,' he wrote.

While he was a member of the House of Representatives and before he was elected to the US Senate, Brown consistently brought up the plight of the Pandits at hearings of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, of

which he was then a member.

It was at his insistence that the State Department more than a decade ago began to include this problem in its annual worldwide human rights reports.

Congressional sources told *India Abroad* that Brown's letter came at the urging of the Indo-American Kashmir Forum, particularly by its founder and president Dr Vijay Sazawal.

Sazawal, a regular presence at Washington area South Asia fora, never fails to bring up the issue, pointing out that after leaving the valley, Pandits are scattered across India in refugee camps. He asserts the Indian government ignores their status and that they live in terrible conditions.

Howard Schaffer, professor at Georgetown University and a former diplomat, wrote in his recent book, *The Limits of Influence: America's Role in Kashmir*, that Sazawal was the Pandits' 'energetic overseas coordinator,' and 'has become a well-known figure to US government officials and influential private Americans interested in the Kashmir issue.'

In an interview, Schaffer quoted Sazawal as telling him that while the forum enjoyed some support in Congress, it cannot make use of this because the Indian embassy in Washington is not interested in promoting the Pandits' cause among pro-Indian members of

Brown would be writing to Clinton on the Pandits' plight, said before Prime Minister Singh visited the US, he would go to Srinagar to speak about a financial package of about \$340 million being put together to rehabilitate Pandits.

'How realistic is it to assume that Pandits will return merely by offers of phantom

jobs — which the state government has already nixed — and increase dole from the center [federal government] for upkeep and rebuilding of homes in Kashmir?' he asked.

'Whatever way you look at it, it was ethnic cleansing. Even the [Indian] National Human Rights Commission in 1990, declared that 'Kashmiri Pandits were subjected to near-genocide conditions before they fled,' he said.

Sazawal acknowledged that Brown's letter was "diplomatically written," to "give the secretary some flexibility regarding how she deals with the Indian government."

"But," he added, "he has assured me he would show the same tenacity with the new secretary of state that he showed in 1996."



PETE D. SOUZA/THE WHITE HOUSE

President Barack Obama receives a red shawl from Narayanachar Digalokote, a Hindu priest from the Sri Siva Vishnu Temple in Lanham, Maryland, in the Blue Room of the White House prior to the