

THOSE WHO STAYED BACK

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This opinion piece addresses the fate of the “forgotten Pandits” who did not flee the valley when terrorists and militants were violently ravaging the lands with executions, mass murders and rapes. The author describes their plight and acknowledges their singular role in ensuring continuity of the 5,000 year old Pandit culture and ethos in Kashmir.

Every Kashmiri Pandit (KP) growing up in Kashmir, whether now or earlier, has always faced a riddle. There is an inexplicable mystery about why those Pandits who leave for a better life outside of the valley very rarely look back to know about the welfare or invest in the well being of those who stayed back. Growing up in Kashmir during 50's and 60's, I heard the same concern over and over again: when will the eminent KP's who surround the PM in New Delhi ever help their brethren in the valley suffering a life of second class citizenship with a bleak future?

The distance from Delhi to Srinagar by air is around 600 kilometers and by road is a bit above 800 kilometers. Yet from the perspective of KP's living at the two ends, they may as well be living in two different worlds. The degree of disconnect appear to be immune to the size of the population of KP's in the valley or to the intensity of their plight. But one has to wonder if such a communication gap existed when over a lakh of KP's were living in the valley, why should it be a surprise that such a gulf has grown even further once the population of those who stayed back has been reduced to under 4,000 souls

After the 1989-1990 forced exodus of KP's, at least 10% of the population – between thirty and forty thousand – stayed back in the valley. Not much was heard of these people (exceptions being prominent political or business families) and KP's outside of the valley mostly ignored them. Many displaced KP's who arrived in Jammu showed little sympathy for those who chose to stay back in the valley and it was common to hear that those who did not leave would probably end up converting to Islam. While

the number of KP's kept trickling out of the valley after the initial deluge, no effort was made to comprehend the psyche or plight of those who had stayed put.

The Centre asked the IB to conduct a head count of the community around the time when the Governor's Rule ended in 2006. The Security Agency counted about 18,000 KP's living in the valley then.

A rude awakening came in March 1997 when 7 KP's were killed in Sangrampura. Not long after in June 1997, a public transport bus was stopped on the Gool-Ramban road and three KP passengers were singled out and killed. In January 1998, 23 KP's were murdered in the hamlet of Wandhama. Another wipeout took place in Naadimarg in March 2003 when 24 men, women and children fell to terrorist guns. The list is long and painful. The KP community outside of the valley denounced these killings and raised a lot of hue and cry, but barring a few, no one actually visited the valley to check out the fate and plight of those who were still there.

My first visit to the valley after these events was the most humbling experience in my life that is seared in my memory for ever. Even though the government had shifted the few odd remaining KP families from remote hamlets to closest district headquarters, these unfortunate souls were living in utter fear, felt isolated, and showed physical and mental strain resulting from insecurity, loss of contact with relatives and friends, loss of income and jobs, and fear of losing revenue records and title to their lands. In that bleak period, nearly 150 families, including some in the Srinagar district were living in impoverished conditions, eating their meals at the nearest Mosque or Gurdwara langers.

This was a time when the land mafia took its roots in Kashmir and started grabbing most of neglected lands, including unattended temple properties. To make the matters worse many valley temples were managed by Trusts which had become dysfunctional since 1990. Trustees had fled from Kashmir and some were busy selling off Trust lands under the belief that a return to the valley was highly improbable or the deal being offered by land mafia was too good to pass up. In desperation, the valley KP's began to establish new temple boards in order to maintain upkeep of some temples and sought legal intervention to block the transfer and sale of temple affiliated lands to various third parties.

We undertook, with the help of a dedicated group of valley KP's, a community wide census in the valley that was completed in June 2010. The results indicated the population of KP's to be around 4,000, with 20% living in the Srinagar district, 24% living in Anantnag district, 21% living in Pulwama district, with the rest scattered in the remaining 7 districts in the valley. The census gave us a picture of gender distribution, employment situation, marriages conducted, births noted, and deaths recorded in the valley in previous two decades (1990-2010).

The PM's employment package for KP's was announced during PM's visit to the State in April 2008. The employment directive is now called the "Rules of 2009". The KP employment scheme was implemented through SRO 412 issued in December 2009. Surprisingly, the State Government ruled that PM's employment package only applied to "migrant KPs" and did not extend to unemployed valley based KP's. Implementation of SRO 412 has been less than perfect for displaced KP's, but it was and is meaningless to valley based KP's. Repeated efforts to request non-valley KP leaders to raise the demand of extending SRO 412 to valley based KP's (who are also mostly displaced from their true homes) has mostly fallen on deaf ears.

To the credit of valley based KP leadership who tried in every way possible to get the State Government to acknowledge their needs, the State Government finally extended the "Rules of 2009" to valley based KP's in 2017 by approving SRO 425 in October 2017, after an eight year delay. But as soon as SRO 425 was issued, the valley based Sikh community blocked its implementation in the State Court. After considerable use of legal resources, the State High Court gave a judgment in favor of KP's in March 2019. However, the State had not implemented the judgment until it was reorganized in August 2019 and remains unimplemented today. The present effort of valley "non-migrant" KP's is to secure at least 500 jobs under "Grade 4" recruitment drive by the UT Government that will provide for 16, 847 new hires in the UT during 2020-2021.

Chances are that most non-valley based folks know nothing about the trials and travails of the 800 odd families of KP's that call Kashmir valley their home today. They are landowners tending orchards, shopkeepers, teachers in public and private schools, various government departments, hospital employees, and a few are working as real estate agents. Some work for Dharmarth and Batra Trusts, and yet

others work at Yatri Niwas group of hotels catering to religious tourism. They were mostly unknown until one of them, a Sarpanch named Shri Ajay Pandita, was killed by terrorists on 8 June 2020.

The “non-migrant” KP’s have survived in spite of being ignored by the rest and while their future looks bleak, they have shown persistence and resilience of the highest standards. Today, they are truly the torch bearers of our ancient culture, religion and customs in its indigenous embodiment in the land of our ancestors. They are our past and, if you think about it carefully, they are also our future.

The above article appeared in the Kashmir Images, a daily English newspaper published from Srinagar, on July 12, 2020. To view the article, please [click here](#).

The breakdown by each of the ten (10) districts in Kashmir of those Kashmiri Pandits seeking 500 jobs mentioned by the author, please [click here](#).