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FROM BONDAGE TO FREEDOM: A TALE OF RESILIENCE OF KASHMIRI PANDITS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *SHIKARA*: *THE UNTOLD STORY OF PANDITS*

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In the words of Wallace Stevens, “exile is a mind of winter in which the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of spring are nearby but unobtainable” (148). Just like these seasons, the culture of an exile ceases to become a part of one particular society. People who are in exile are cognizant of more than one culture. Their identity is lost. The new environment becomes difficult to adapt. Thus, exile is never the state of being secure. It has been one of the oldest forms of displacement in human history where individuals or groups moved away from their places of origin for various reasons. One encounters descriptions of exilic conditions in the Indian epics The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, where the prince was forced to spend his life in the woods. Both epics portray how the exile period was filled with despair, suffering and deprivation. The gloating of the enemies further augmented the anguish and distress. The fall of Adam and Eve may also be considered a form of exile. They lived in their state of innocence with God in the Garden of Eden but the serpent tempted them to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil which was forbidden by God. This resulted in the Fall of Adam and Eve, who were exiled from the Garden of Eden by God. “Therefore

the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man” (Genesis 3:23-24).

An exilic life becomes a constrained life with sudden shift from ‘home to homelessness’, from ‘secured life amidst familiar surroundings to an insecure life with temporary dwelling’ followed by imposed affiliations and new loyalties. The strong political undercurrents running through the term exile never go unnoticed. It is a life of compulsion, not of choice. An exiled leads as his own philosophic, cultural and religious beliefs are fractured.

Kashmir, ‘Paradise on Earth’ was once a state where two communities (Hindus and Muslims) lived peacefully in harmony and brotherhood, but soon it became a place of militancy and terrorism. Since 1947, neither India nor Pakistan has reached consensus on an argument for the territory of Kashmir. This conflict is an outgrowth of colonialism. Post- partition, the population of Kashmir was majority Muslims but with a Hindu ruler, Hari Singh, who was oppressive. He did not want to side with either India or Pakistan but when Kashmir was invaded; Indian army came to Kashmir’s rescue. It was believed that the government of Pakistan had supported the invasion. Later, his decision to make Kashmir, a part of India received a seething criticism from Pakistan. In the wake of these developments it was decided to make Kashmir an autonomous state. In 1949, Article 370 was drafted granting special autonomous status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Many governing powers were given to the people of Kashmir, except powers such as defense, currency, communications and foreign exchange. A separate constitution was drafted for Kashmir with its own flag. The Kashmiri assembly was allowed to decide as to which Indian laws should apply to Kashmir. However, too much autonomy became a problem for the central government. In 1953, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India removed the Prime Minister of Kashmir and whittled down Article 370, limiting Kashmiri autonomy.

Now, the central government became the cause of concern for Kashmiris and they forgot the oppression of the earlier ruler, Hari Singh. The tension further increased as clashes triggered between the governments of India and Pakistan as to who should exercise control over the land of Kashmir. The conditions worsened in 1990 when Kashmiri Pandits were forced by the Islamic militants to leave their homes forever.

There was violence everywhere. People were brutally killed, Pandit women were raped, children were abducted and were forced to convert themselves to Islam. According to Islamic militants, they were ‘cleansing’ out the dirt from the beautiful valley of Kashmir. Pandits, who owned lands in Kashmir were made to live in refugee camps in Jammu where living conditions were beyond imagination.

Ah! Will not the flower bloom in the garden as in the past?

Does not the bulbul perch on the window-sill to sing, as in the past?...

Do you think we’ll never come together, as in the past?



In early 1990, Kashmiri Pandits, a community of proud people whose history dates back 5,000 years, were transformed into exiles overnight. Thirty years later, a film on their exodus, *Shikara: The Untold Story of Kashmiri Pandits*, written by Rahul Pandita and directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, has a Hindu character saying to another a line that encapsulates the community’s hope, which its every member has seen die a slow, painful death: “*Dekhna Parliament mein shor machega*”. Unfortunately, there was no *shor* /uproar regarding the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. Not once. If there is one thing worse than losing your homeland, it is the cloak of silence that society puts over it. For as long as they can remember, no one listened to or spoke about the 3,50,000 Kashmiri Pandits who had fled the Valley by the end of 1990. A community that honoured itself on contributing Prime Ministers and powerful officials found it had become invisible. There was a complete silence, one that only now, three decades later, has partly begun to make some noise.

Shikara: The Untold Story of Kashmiri Pandits is a story of resilience in the face of insurmountable odds. It is also a story of love that remains unextinguished through thirty years of exile. A timeless love story in such terrible and worst of times. *Shikara: The Untold Story of Kashmiri Pandits* addresses the issue of Kashmiri Pandit and Muslim conflict, riots and the so-called ‘ethnic cleansing’ by the militants in 1989 and 1990 in Kashmir. The film chronicles the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir on the night of 19th

January, 1990 through the story of Shiv Kumar Dhar who is a professor in the University and Shanti Dhar, his wife. It also focuses on their blooming romance in such conflict ridden affairs of the state. Their love and faith in each other made them believe, that one day they will get back to their homeland, their livelihood, their own little paradise.

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress like family and relationship problems, serious health problems, workplace and financial stressors or loss of self or their homeland. It means bouncing back from difficult experiences. However, even though resilient people can survive the tragedies they have endured, it does not mean that they do not experience emotional pain, difficulty or distress. This film, therefore, provides a wide range of instances in which the characters must endure their pain and trauma and continue living their lives.

This film portrays that Kashmiri Pandits are not afraid of hardships (as they have witnessed and undergone it themselves), are used to mobility and always hopeful about the future. But despite having seen six waves of migration, beginning with one under Shah Mir, an invader who established Muslim rule in Kashmir, in the 14th century, the community was not prepared for its seventh exodus. What happened on 19 January 1990 can never be forgotten; for many, it can never be forgiven. Siddhartha Gigoo, the author of *The Garden of Solitude* (2011) was fifteen when his family fled their ancestral home in Srinagar because of the threats announced from loudspeakers were clear enough- *reliv, seliv ya geliv* (convert, leave or die). The land that for centuries had welcomed and sheltered numerous scholars, mystics, conquerors, missionaries, atheists, agnostics and warriors and allowed them to profess and practise their ideas and beliefs, had no place for its original inhabitants anymore. From 1990 to 2000, thousands of people (mostly Kashmiri Pandits) perished because of lack of proper rations, water, medical care and sanitation. All deaths were unnatural and untimely. Many unknown diseases struck the young and the old. Years passed. Nobody paid heed to what the Kashmiri Pandit exiles were made to go through in these migrant camps. Many people died due to lack of proper living standards and some fortunate people who could fight such adverse living conditions survived.

When people are uprooted from their homes, they not only lose their identity and a sense of belonging, they also lose the language to communicate their pain. A new vocabulary characterised by dispossession takes birth. In the migrant camps, Pandits learnt new words and their meanings. Ration card, migrant, tent, relief,

dementia, diabetes, arthritis, tumour, sunstroke, snakebite, heatstroke, hypertension, amnesia, depression were some of the words they became acquainted with during their tenure in the camps. However, camp life in the movie was depicted relatively pleasant and tolerable where the characters lived in separate tents with their respective families. In a few years, many displaced Pandits were shifted to quarters. But in reality, the conditions were beyond imagination. Migrants, along with their families, moved to a migrant camp where they witnessed horrible situations, worse conditions of survival, where people were fighting for a better living conditions and the old, on their death bed struggling to visit their 'home' just for one last time.

One instance when a fellow Muslim brethren from Shiv Kumar Dhar's hometown visits him to negotiate with him to sell his ancestral home but the hope in Dhar's heart is firm that one day they will return and refuses to sell his home. His heart believes that one day #HumWapasAayenge. Dhar further says, "*Hamare ghar pe aapka koi haq nahi* (You have no right over my home)". This is the first brave admonishment by him, reflective of gradual resolution to not be a spectator anymore. References like these in the movie shows its resilient nature and they have returned to stand their ground, films like *Shikara* are not to be used as fleeting references anymore.

Vidhu Vinod Chopra, as a director remains focused on showcasing the plight of only the Kashmiri Pandits, though he does give a personal touch to the storyline. This film is highly autobiographical in nature. It stems from his personal account, of how his late mother could never return to the valley after being exiled just like the protagonists of the film Shiv Kumar Dhar and his wife Shanti Dhar. Shanti could never return back to her homeland. She dies in her husband's arms in Agra where they were celebrating their honeymoon after 30 long years (exodus being followed immediately after their marriage). Chopra's cousin was killed in the communal riots back then. Similarly Naveen, who was Dhar's cousin was shot dead one fine afternoon.

The transformation of friends and neighbours into enemies is another prominent aspect highlighted in the movie. On one hand, Lateef, Dhar's childhood best friend turns into a militant because his father was killed after becoming a victim of Hindu- Muslim riot. Lateef does not turn a blind eye towards Dhar but instead, as a friend warns him to leave Kashmir with his family before anything bad happens to him. On the

other hand, Dhar's neighbour and milkman who on the face value were saving Dhar and his family from being killed and their house being burnt on the unfateful night of January 19th, 1990 but in reality were saving the home for their use. When years later Dhar and his wife visits their ancestral property just for that one last look, to their astonishment they find their neighbour has illegally occupied their home. To this, Dhar and his wife, Shanti reacted with deep-seated anger, resentment but helplessness. They could not do anything about it in present times but they promised to return to their home one day where after their death, their bodies will be cremated there.

One of the reasons the exodus has not been debated much is because the resilient Kashmiri Pandits were largely able to face the trauma of the violence and rise above it. Instead of playing the victims, which was their right, they rebuilt their lives and became engaged in carving out a new identity for themselves.

For Rahul Pandita, (writer of *Shikara: The Untold Story of Kashmiri Pandits*) author of *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013) believes that writing this movie and book was a way of coming to terms with the enormous hurt but it was not an easy task. He illustrates in his book that at several times he had to stop, especially during passages where he had to relive the death of his brother, Ravi, and with his mother's illness, induced by those initial years of trauma as a refugee. He was in a delirium while writing. He recalls that in the initial years he could not read his own book. He was so overcome with emotions.

The last 30 years have been the darkest period in the history of Kashmiri Pandits. Many Pandits are still languishing in darkness because they remain in camps, waiting to go back to their long-lost homes in the Valley. But most are resigned to their fate. The hope which they kept alive for more than a quarter of a century is diminishing. Now, they don't even know what is there to go back to. Nothing remains of their homes. Not even ruins.

The Kashmiri Pandits are facing an existential crisis. If the generation of Pandits born in Kashmir before 1990 do not return, the community we know as Kashmiri Pandits may not exist. There are many reasons for that. First of all, those born after 1990, outside Kashmir, do not have a direct link with the land. Their culture and understanding of Kashmir is derived from second-hand sources and not by first-hand experience.

Second of all, the generation that took the mantle of passing on the culture and identity to the new generation is growing older now. Thirdly, the culture and the identity of Kashmiri Pandits living outside Kashmir is already getting diluted and influenced by external factors. So, for the community, the culture and their identity to survive — it is imperative that Kashmiri Pandits of older generation, along with the younger ones, are able to return to Kashmir.

The renewed cry: #HumWapasAayenge (we will come back), gave a stimulus by the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status under Article 370, which in itself, has generated mixed feelings among Kashmiri Pandits. As Gigoo, who wrote his novel, *The Garden of Solitude* (2011) writes : “People all over the country started talking of being able to buy land and property in Jammu and Kashmir. Stripped of its special status, Kashmir is now a place that belongs to everyone...” But can Kashmiri Pandits go there just like everyone else from India? How must they return given the history behind their forced exodus? The state certificate they had has no legal relevance now, even though its emotional relevance will never fade. It grants Kashmiri Pandits born in the Valley special status with unique rights and privileges that other Indians did not have. The special status in the erstwhile state's constitution that failed to protect them from persecution in 1990 or guarantee their dignified return, is now gone forever. In its place exists the yearning for restitution, stronger than ever. The dream of home, to reclaim everything that was snatched from them, lingers on.

Someday, those who survived, will return to their homes in Kashmir. And that day, these Pandits shall take along all records to show their progeny the proof of their survival and of the intrepid journeys they made in exile. For now, though, suspicion, distrust and a sense of betrayal prevails. The current generation of Pandits and Muslims don't know each other. Kashmir is claimed by both communities.

Time and again, there is a constant reference to good old times spent between the two communities Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims in the film. Right from the beginning, the protagonist, Dhar is seen having amicable relationship with his Muslim neighbours and his childhood friend is a Muslim too, Lateef who later transforms into a militant. Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims are two sides of the same coin. They are

a part of the same tradition even if their religious identities may differ. In schools, colleges, streets, markets, businesses and any other activity Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims were always supportive of each other and worked together as one community.

However, the film did receive a lot of criticism and it may have not fit 30 years of horror and survival and will raise counter-arguments, but it does capture the incredible sequences, the ruthless, cold-blooded murders, the havoc and mayhem, helplessness, confusion, fear, the pain of separation and the hope to return back one day that are exclusive to Kashmiri Pandit narrative but were never highlighted in a visual mass medium.

The tragedy of the Pandits — for children to lose their language, for elders to face a strange new world, for the young to feel disempowered, to be targeted —has not elicited the kind of resolution that would make things whole for them or even partially whole. There’s a lot of lip-service, but very little in terms of figuring out how Kashmiri Pandits can have their dignity fully restored. The whole film illustrates this- the required hard work, genuine bridge-building, a step-by-step painstaking effort of rebuilding trust and reconciliation but after a lot of truth-telling in an environment that doesn’t censor feelings or thoughts. The political leadership has failed to facilitate any of this. The eternal question that remains throughout the film and till the last scene when Shiv Kumar Dhar, after his wife’s death goes back to his hometown, only to witness the dilapidated ruins of his house : Will Kashmir be free of violence and militancy? With there be catharsis and closure? Perhaps not, but as Bertolt Brecht wrote: “In the dark times, will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times.”

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