

Return and Rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandit Migrants : State Responsibility

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Abstract

Kashmir, which is known for its composite culture of the people (Kashmiriyat) all over the world had to the cataclysm that visited Kashmir in the early 1990s and hurt the society so deeply that the wounds are yet to heal by forcing an important community (Pandit) to leave their motherland. There are few who held the then Governor of Jammu and Kashmir, Jagmohan, responsible for the exodus. Some people said Pandits left on their own because of the frightening situation in the valley. Such people naturally emphasized how sponsored armed militancy destroyed peace and ruined communal harmony. A few said Kashmiri Muslims did nothing to prevent the Pandit exodus, although many felt the majority community was itself and it was impossible for them to stop the exodus. Whatsoever, the reasons were, but the Pandits had to leave the valley without their properties and were forced to live in the camps with no facilities at all. Both the central as well as the state governments have taken many steps to make the life of these Pandits better in these camps. But the government has been firm for their return and rehabilitation in valley and for this many initiatives have been taken. This paper will have a look at the measures taken by government for the Kashmiri Pandits living in exile.

INTRODUCTION

The Kashmiri Pandit community is the single largest community which got displaced from Kashmir valley to Jammu and other parts of the country. It is believed that there were three phases of Pandit displacement from the valley. The first phase took place between mid-1989-1990 when there were many non-

state actors like Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) who were fighting with the Indian army for the reason of either independence or accession to Pakistan. The Pandits were numerically less and were treated as traitors by the non-state actors and thus, became vulnerable to the terrorists. This resulted in the mass exodus of Pandits from the valley which started on 21st January, 1990. Many of the displaced fled to Delhi and other parts of the country, while majority of the community got settled in the camps established by the government in the Jammu division of the State. The second phase of Pandit displacement took place in March, 1997 when seven Pandits were killed at Sangrampora district Budgam and 23 in Wandhama in the district Ganderbal by the militants. During this phase, many prominent leaders from both the Hindu and Muslim communities were murdered, and their families were threatened and the Pandits felt that they have no option except leaving the homeland. The third phase started when 24 Pandits were killed in a village Nadimarg in Pulwama district in 2003. The data regarding the displacement of Pandits due to the Sangrampora and Nadimarg incidents is not available (Subramanian, 2005). Though the community has not been recognised as internally displaced people by the Government of India, but as 'migrants' but the assistance provided to them is quite better than the other displaced groups in India (IDMC, 2010). Both the Government of India as well as the State government has been serious in resettling the displaced community back in Kashmir. For this, a variety of measures have been taken over the years by means of financial assistance, relief and other initiatives. On the experimental basis, construction of 200 flats were approved by the Government of India at Sheikhpora in Budgam district for the return and rehabilitation of Pandits. Apart from it, 350 transit accommodations were constructed at four districts of the valley-Baramulla, Kulgam, Budgam and Kupwara. In 2009, the state government constituted an apex committee under the chairmanship of Revenue Minister to look over the return and rehabilitation policy. The State government claimed that it had received 4,621 applications from the migrants who want to return. The Pandit shrines at the Mattan in Anantnag district and Kheer Bhavani in Ganderbal district have been developed into model clusters with shelter facilities. At Mattan, 18 flats and at Kheer Bhavani, 100 one room tenements have been constructed by the state government for the temporary shelter of the pilgrims. The migration of the Pandits from the valley had put huge pressure on the state funds as most of the resources are used for their return and rehabilitation measures. Not only the state but the union government has been providing every kind of assistance to the displaced Kashmiri Pandits. The total number of families registered were 56,246, but out of it only 28,546 were entitled for the relief provided by the

government as the remaining were either government employees or pensioners and were getting their salaries and pensions without any stoppage. As most of the Kashmiri Pandits migrated to Jammu and Delhi, and few of them migrated to other states of the country, the same has been divided into three regions-Jammu, Delhi and other states for the convenience. However, it should be noted that the relief package does not include the construction and maintenance of camps. Further, the amount spent on the physical and social infrastructure such as the construction of roads and toilets, providing of drinking water and electricity, construction of hospitals, schools and so on, has not been included in the Table. The prices given for the ration are approximately the market value

Table 1**Estimate of Relief Extended to the Displaced People from Kashmir**

	Jammu	Delhi	Other States
Families	34305	19338	2603
Families Entitled for Relief	13378	12685	2483
Relief Package (Cash)	Rs.3000 per family per month	Rs.2400	Rs.2400
Relief Expenses/ Annum	Rs.481.6 million	Rs.365.3 million	Rs.71.5 million
Rations	Rice - 9 kgs per month, (@ 14 per kg) Wheat Flour - 2 kgs per month (@ 9 per kg) Sugar-1 kg per month (@ 16 per kg)	Rice - 9 kgs, (@ 14 per kg) Wheat Flour - 2 kgs (@ 9 per kg) Sugar - 1 kg (@ 16 per kg)	Rice - 9 kgs, (@ 14 per kg) Wheat Flour - 2 kgs (@ 9 per kg) Sugar - 1 kg (@ 16 per kg)
Ration Expenditure / Annum	Rs.25.68 million per annum	Rs.24.24 million	Rs.4.68 million
Shelter	Not included		
Total Relief Extended per Annum in all the Locations	Rs.973 million		

Source : Hamid, 2013 "Migration, Return and Rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits : State Response".

of the ration. Table 1 will give us an idea regarding the relief provided to the Kashmiri Pandits and its forms, too (Hamid, 2013).

The above Table indicates that an amount of Rs 973 million has been spent by the governments and indicates the seriousness of both the states as well as the centre government towards rehabilitating the Kashmir Pandits. However, the Honourable Prime Minister of India announced a package of 16.18 billion in 2008 for the return and rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits with an aim that the displaced community could be resettled back in valley with security and honour. Out of the total amount announced by the Prime Minister, Rs.7.5 lacs per family were meant for constructing a new house or buy a new apartment back in the valley (IDMC, 2010). The main components of the package were as under :

Housing

During the initial period of the migration, the camps were established by the Government at different places to overcome the difficulties of accommodation. The camps where tents were provided to the families were replaced by one room tenements (ORTs) and various government buildings were provided for the accommodation of the displaced. The details of the camps which were established for the Kashmiri Pandits in the Jammu are as :

Table 2
Distribution of Camps for the Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu

S.No.	Name of Camp	No. of ORTs
1.	Muthi I	500
2.	Muthi II	500
3.	Mishriwalla	956
4.	Purkhoo	1588
5.	Nagrota	808
6.	Battal Ballian, Udampur	396
7.	Others (Govt. Buildings, Temples etc.)	494
	Total	5242

Source : Relief Organisation (Migrants), Jammu, Government of Jammu & Kashmir, 2009.

Though the measures taken by the government for the rehabilitation of the Pandit community may not be enough, but it can be seen from the Table that the government responded quickly to accommodate much of the displaced

people either in camps or in government buildings. The camps mentioned at S.No. 2, 6 & 7 have been closed by the government and the displaced people living in these camps were shifted to the two room tenements (TRTs) constructed under Prime Minister's package announced in 2004. 1024 Two Room Tenement flats were constructed at the cost Rs.51 Crores on the recommendation of the inter-ministerial team constituted by the Prime Minister in 2004 for the rehabilitation of the displaced community. The details of these Two Room Tenements are as :

Table 3

Distribution of Two Room Tenements for Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu

S.No.	Name of Camp	No. of ORTs
1	Purkhoo	256
2	Muthi	384
3	Nagrota	384
	Total	1024

Source : Relief Organisation (Migrants), Jammu, Government of Jammu & Kashmir, 2009.

Apart from the Two Room Tenements provided to the displaced people of Kashmir, the Prime Minister in 2007 laid the foundation stone of a big township at Jagti in Nagrota comprising of 4218 flats to accommodate the remaining migrants living in one room tenements at various camps. The township has been constructed on 718 kanals of land at the cost of Rs 294 crores. It is supposed to accommodate 25000 people. The basic facilities provided to the township include - 30-bedded hospital, 3 community centres, one higher secondary school and two middle schools. Apart from these facilities, the township has a separate 30 MVA power station, sewerage treatment plant, good road connectivity and water supply (Relief Organisation (Migrants), Jammu, Government of Jammu & Kashmir, 2009).

In 2008, a package was announced by the Honourable Prime Minister with the aim of encouraging Kashmiri displaced Pandits to resettle back in Kashmir. In the package, it was announced that a financial assistance of Rs.7.5 lakh per family will be provided for the repair or reconstruction of damaged houses back in Kashmir. For those whose houses are dilapidated or unused a financial aid of Rs.2 lakh were announced and for those who have sold their properties during the conflict, an assistance of Rs.7.5 lakh was announced for them to either purchase or construct a new house of their own.

Transit Accommodation

The displaced Pandits who want to return back to Kashmir will be provided transit accommodation during the interim period when they will undertake the reconstruction or repair work of their houses. For this purpose, the government has built 469 transit accommodations at four places – Qazigund Anantnag district, Sheikhpora in district Budgam, Khanpura Baramulla district and Vessu Kulgam district in the valley. Those families who could not get transit accommodation due to any reason would be given rental as well as incidental expenses community (Ministry of Home Affairs, GOI).

Continuation of Cash Relief

The government in its package for the return and rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits announced that the registered migrant families at Jammu and Delhi, who are recipients of the cash relief as well as the free ration, will continue to receive the same for a period of two years after their resettlement in the valley.

Student Scholarships

The children of the Kashmiri Pandit families were provided with a cash assistance of Rs.750 per month up to the age of 18 years and the same may be extended to 21 years of age in exceptional cases. Financial assistance is also paid to eligible students for carrying out professional degrees under the Rehabilitation Council of J&K scheme. The States where the seats have been reserved in professional institutions for the Kashmiri migrant students include Delhi, Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The Ministry of Human Resource Development had issued guidelines that at least one percent of the seats should be reserved for the children of Kashmiri migrants (PSC, 2009). The UGC in 2014 had directed the universities to implement the reservation kept for the Kashmiri migrant students. As per the communication, there should be relaxation of ten percent in the cut-off for the Kashmiri migrant students. Apart from it, the intake capacity should be increased to five percent per course and at least one seat should be reserved in technical as well as in professional institutions for the Kashmiri migrant students (The Hindu, 30 June 2014).

Employment

The package included that the educated migrant youth will be provided with State Government jobs and the unemployed youth will be given financial assistance in terms of loans and grants to start their own business. It was decided

that 15,000 unemployed migrant youth will be provided with employment opportunities. Out of the 15000 youth, the 6000 will be provided with State Government services and to lessen the burden of the state, the Central Government will bear the salary of 3000 youth until they get absorbed against the regular posts in the State Government. The remaining 9,000 unemployed youth will be provided one-time financial aid of Rs 5.00 lac of which 50% will be grant and remaining 50% will be as loan to start their own business ventures. The Pandit families, who were having land holdings back in Kashmir, were provided one-time cash assistance of Rs one lac (Relief Organisation (Migrants), Jammu, Government of Jammu & Kashmir, 2009).

Critique to State Policies

Though the successive governments at the centre and state have claimed various policies about the return and rehabilitation of the Pandit community, but these policies have been largely criticised by the exiled pandits blaming that these policies are only on papers and no concrete steps have been taken by the governments for their return to their motherland. While talking to The Hindu newspaper, Mohan Lal, who lives in a hut at Jagti camp on the outskirts of Jammu city, says they are living as "refugees in our own country" for three decades but "nothing" is being done for their return and rehabilitation by the government. Further, he continues that "Promises made and policies adopted by successive governments for our rehabilitation have fallen flat due to opposition from Kashmir". Like Lal, 80-year-old Soomawatis too, want, to return home in the border district of Kupwara. She says, "I want to return and die in my home. But nobody is fulfilling my last wish, neither the government nor my family" (The Hindu, 11 January 2019).

In September 2017, Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh announced in Srinagar that the central government had decided to construct 6,000 transit accommodations for Kashmiri Pandits. But the plan to rehabilitate Kashmiri Pandits in three composite townships in North, South and Central Kashmir was opposed by the National Conference and separatists, BJP MLC Surinder Ambardar said. "I feel there is a need to carve out separate homeland for the community." Safety and security is another hurdle for the return and rehabilitation of the pandits as over 1,900 educated youths were given employments in Kashmir under the prime minister's job package and put up in four different transit accommodations. But they fled following stone pelting on their camps in Kashmir after the killing Hizbul Mujahideen division commander Burhan Wani in July 2016 (The Hindu, 11 January 2019).

There have been various obstacles for the return and rehabilitation of the community, primarily safety and security. Other hurdles include the unwillingness of the separatists to allow separate homeland for the pandits. The political turmoil in the valley has also reduced the chances of pandits to return.

CONCLUSION

Though the measures taken by the central as well as the state government may not be enough, but there is a phrase 'something is better than nothing'. The state has been trying their maximum for the safe return and rehabilitation of Pandits to their motherland. Besides many steps, the setting up of separate colonies for Pandits have been largely criticised in the Valley. This is seen as an Israeli ploy to create walls of hatred here, spread fire and divide the communities by the Hurriyat leaders. They argue that the Pandits are part and parcel of the Kashmiri society and nobody can stop them from returning to their home land, but they are against settling them in separate colonies to maintain the age-old harmony between the communities. It is the responsibility of every Kashmiri irrespective of religion to make the environment feasible so that the Pandits return and live as they used to live since time immemorial.

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