Hope Dwindles for the Kashmir Pandits, Languishing in Squalid Refugee Camps
Category : November 1994
Published by Anonymous on Nov. 01, 1994

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Prabha B. Bhardwaj

During her recent sojourn in India, Hinduism Today's African-based correspondent Prabha Prabhakar Bhardwaj visited the camps housing an exiled Kashmir pandit community fleeing from communal violence. She was deeply touched by what she found in the once-tranquil region.

By Prabha Prabhakar Bhardwaj Nairobi, Kenya

Kashmir pandits are confined to shabby camps in appalling conditions, yet they are not the least bit bitter. They take this as part of life and destiny. In spite of the gross injustice meted out to them, they avow implicit faith in God and continue to carry out their traditional religious rituals regularly.

I spent a day at Mishriwala Camp in Jammu, talking to inmates and sharing their life. Mr. Jawahar Lal Thaploo, secretary of this camp, asked me, "How can I and my wife or my son and his wife lead a normal life, when we are confined to the space of this tent?" The tent is roughly ten feet square. One corner is the kitchen. One side is the temple. Another corner is a sitting room during the day and the bedroom at night. On another side is a small bed where he sleeps. The setup is identical in all tents. In Kashmir Thaploo served as an Assistant Executive Engineer with the government's Roads and Buildings Department. For the last five years, he has lived at this camp while continuing to draw his old salary. Under normal circumstances, he would have been promoted to the position of Superintending Engineer. Now he has no job in the camp to go to. Thaploo was forced to leave the

Kashmir Valley after many of his friends were brutally murdered. He brought only a Siva Linga with him, the possession he most valued. He nurtures the hope of returning one day, although he knows that his house and belongings have been incinerated.

Thaploo's major concern is for the future generations. "With so little privacy," he asks, "how can there be children? In the camp, I saw no infants. There were mostly middle-aged people or teenagers. The youngest person I met was Meenakshi Kaul who was preparing for 10th class exam. She was seated in a corner of the family tent surrounded by her books. In one corner of the same small hovel lunch was being prepared, in another idle friends of the father were talking animatedly, venting their despair. Meenakshi felt she could work much better if she just had a quiet corner to herself where she could concentrate without disturbance.

Rita Pandit lives in Muthi Camp. There the tents have been replaced with cement and brick rooms of the same size, ten by twelve feet. There are communal toilets and bathrooms. Eight family members share this room. They receive water, but it comes at odd hours of the night. They cannot sleep in peace, for someone has to keep vigil. When water flows in the pipes, they must be awake to quickly collect and store it for the next twenty four or more hours. Rita is 24 years old. She has learned to type and is working with the Social Welfare Board. She endures bouts of depression because her father, who was a successful businessman, is sitting at home doing nothing, and her younger brothers seem to have no future in terms of admissions in professional colleges or government jobs. They cannot even draw solace from prayer, because every activity takes place in that one room. Although they have established a corner as a temple, there are too many people around all the time. It is difficult to worship and meditate. Only on occasion can they go to temples. In Kashmir they had two houses, and one room was used as a temple. The whole family used to offer morning and evening prayers. No more.

Before they fled, they had been forced to eat beef, which their religion does not allow. After five years of stay in Jammu, they feel acclimatized. She is afraid to return to Kashmir. She has a very deep-rooted fear of Islam, looting and violence and does not wish to go through it again.

The beauty and rosy complexion of Kashmiri women is proverbial. Now the young ladies at the camp feel miserable at the loss of their beauty because of Jammu's hot and harsh climate. The climactic and environmental changes affected

everyone. In the first year, about 5,000 persons died of sunstroke, gastroenteritis, typhoid epidemics, snake bites, etc. Some died due to heart attacks and accidents caused by extreme psychological trauma and mental stress, according to doctors.

It is the women who have come out stronger in exile. According to Mrs. Usha Bhat, her husband stays at the tent, lamenting his past, is unable to accept the reality of the present or undertake any job. She has decided to accept a menial job which gives her a small salary, and she is planning for the future of her three children. She wants to educate them in better schools to provide opportunity for pursuing successful careers. The husband idles away his time. He smokes, drinks, plays cards and waits for the dole money (US$47) which he receives as the head of the family at the end of each month. She and the other women and young people are frustrated that religion has taken a back seat in the harsh circumstances. And this in spite of the innate religiousness of the community. Ironically, it is because of their religion that they have been made refugees. But she believes that it is only their faith in God which helped them to escape from Kashmir with their honor intact.

I spoke with some Kashmir Muslims in Jammu and Delhi who prefer to remain anonymous. Two significant facts emerged out of these discussions. First is that many Muslims leave their families in Jammu when the government offices move to Srinagar for the winter, so that their education is not disrupted and because Jammu is safer and quieter town. The gentleman in Delhi said, "We miss our pandit neighbors. The valley is no longer safe for us. In fact the militants now attack our households. They had got used to a special lifestyle. With Hindus no longer available as easy targets, we are now the victims."

Dr. Shakti Bhan [photo left below] was professor of gynecology at Kashmir University, Srinagar. She had to flee her home on January 19th, 1990. Most people left in 1989, but she stayed on as long as she could. Now she is practicing in Delhi and is working as chairperson of an organization, "Daughters of Vitasta" [River Jhelum which flows through the valley]. This is the women's wing of Panun Kashmir ["Our Kashmir"-see sidebar right]. She says, "We do not want to go back to Kashmir as a minority. We want to have a homeland based on our population, so that we are not hounded out again." According to her, women have come out stronger because it is women who took the decision to leave to preserve their sanctity and self respect. Women have come out bolder, and they are doing work to survive. Men have become apathetic and depressed.

Dr. Bhan strongly believes in the formation of a homeland through Satyagraha (passive agitation), Mahatma Gandhi style. She says, "We have the idea of a homeland. It shall be achieved one day, though maybe not in my lifetime. India's independence struggle lasted over 200 years. We are only in the fourth year of crusade. Kashmiris shall return to their home land. We are the original aborigines of Kashmir, our rightful place has to be restored." She says journalists take very little interest in the issue because Kashmir pandits do not make a vote bank.

In June of this year the Doda area of Kashmir, which is a majority Muslim area, has come under attack by the militants. Acts of murder, robbery and extortion have terrorized the Hindu inhabitants and many local Muslims as well. So far, many are trying to stick it out. "We are not about to trade our homes for tents in Jammu. Our homes are here. We are not going anywhere," a young shopkeeper told the Hindu newspaper. Muslims are also suffering. "The Hindu can at least give vent to their feelings by opening up against militants, we cannot even do that," said one Muslim government employee.

The pandits' outlook is grim. The political and military reality is that peace is far off in the Kashmir Valley. Few believe any of the parts occupied by Pakistan and China will ever be returned to India. Solutions focus only on establishing the "Line of Control" [see map] as the international boundary. And that would require an unlikely accord with Pakistan. In the meantime, it is the Kashmir pandits whose ancient culture slowly succumbs in the mud of Jammu's squalid refugee camps.

A Homeland for the Kashmir Pandits?

Kashmir was one of the first areas of India conquered by the invading Muslims forces. By the 15th century, nearly everyone had been converted to Islam, save eleven brahmin families who fled to the mountains. By the 16th century, this group had been allowed to return and practice Hinduism freely. They, along with a few hundred more Hindus only half-converted to Islam, form the ancestors of all the Kashmir pandits today. In the last fifty years, many families have moved away, and after the recent violence, nearly every single Hindu has fled. A 1991 meeting of 1,200 pandits at Jammu proposed the creation of a homeland for Kashmir pandits. This land, to be called Panun Kashmir ("Our Kashmir"), would be in largely unpopulated territory north and east of River Jhelum [see map above]. It would be a Union Territory directly under the central government. The 700,000 Kashmiris forced to leave Kashmir since 1947 could live in this newly created state. According to Dr. Moza of the American-based Kashmir Pandit International, the pandits are even prepared to finance the project. The government of India is not in favor of the proposal, officially because it would create a difficult precedent and unofficially

because it would offend the Muslims. Given the military situation on the ground, this proposal is not likely to see any progress in the near future. In part it was put forward for the purpose of gaining international publicity for the pandits' largely neglected plight.

Pandits Create a Replica in Jammu Of the Kheer Bhawani Temple

In almost all tents or brick houses in the refugee camps there are small temples where the family worships daily. In Mishriwala Camp, I saw a Siva Lingam [photo left] at which the residents offer regular community prayers. There is only a platform, no walls or roof. But in a colony known as Bhawani Nagar, a much more ambitious project was undertaken. The colony, established by an enterprising group of pandits, has created a replica of the Kheer Bhawani temple in Kashmir. It was begun on February 24th, 1993.

In Kashmir the original temple is situated at Tulmool near Gandharbal, in a natural spring. In Jammu they have created an artificial water source and established the deity of Yog Maya. The shape is exactly like the original one, but much smaller in size. Yet it fills a void created in a Kashmir pandit's life, who are deeply attached to the original. It is on top of a hill, overlooking River Tawi and the city of Jammu below. In every direction is beauty. I asked the Priest Pandit Kumar Giri Sachidanand, who comes from Hyderabad and has lived in Kashmir for last forty years, about the future of the original Kheer Bhawani. Like most Kashmiris, he believes that one day the pandits shall be able to return to their homeland. If they cannot, there are plans to bring the original deity from Tulmool to Jammu.

The water tank [photo above] has six corners and is in the shape of Omkar in the Sharda script. The color of the water used to change in the Kashmir temple. Some believed that the color reflected one's aura. But the wider belief was that color indicated the country's well being. For example, colors changed from pink, blue, beige, red to black, etc. Pink and other pleasant colors represent purity and peace, where as black reflects negativity.

The major festival is observed on the Shukla Ashtami of Jayaseth (8th day of moon phase in Jeth) month. This year the festival of Shukla Ashtami was attended by thousands of devotees.