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Garden of Solitude and Kashmiri Pandits: Breaking the Silence

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Abstract

In this paper, issues that Kashmiri Pandits had to face in Kashmir due to which they had to leave their homes and migrate to other parts of India has been discussed. In understanding the conflicts that lead to the exodus, a reading of Siddharth Gigoo's novel Garden of Solitude, published in 2010 has been done. The novel tells the story about how the brotherhood between the people of Kashmir got destroyed because of vested interests in the region. Due to that Kashmiri Pandits got ultimatum from the militants to leave Kashmir. The novel highlights the hardship that Kashmiri Pandits went through and how their issues were not taken by the media and the governments since then. The paper also explores how the writer deals with the politics of the exodus and what was his idea behind the novel. The novel is quite close to the life of the author and authenticates his narrative.

Keywords: Kashmiri Pandits, exodus, garden of solitude, silence, voice

Since independence, Kashmir has always been a 'problem' which is still to be solved between India and Pakistan. A state with a Muslim majority in a Hindu Majority nation came to India's hands because of Sheikh Abdulla, who was its first democratically elected head, but a Muslim



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majority state in Hindu majority country, having huge employment of Indian Paramilitary force, had to have its share of suspicions.

These suspicions were given air by the separatist groups, some of whom wanted to be free from both the countries and some who wanted to join Pakistan on religious ground. The movement was led by Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, but it was supported by the extremists Hizb-ul-Mujahideen who were not quite supportive of the idea of Kashmir with Hindus in it.

This extremism prompted a lot more paramilitary forces to enter there, which increased the vulnerability of the situation. They wanted freedom from this 'military occupation' and the Indian government wanted to stop the spread of that movement. Gradually the movement got momentum due to an increase in support from more and more people.

They saw the Indian government as a dictator and Indian army as tyrants. Increase in Paramilitary forces resulted in constant battles between the separatists and the army. Ramachandra Guha says:

Scarcely a week passed without a suicide attack on an army post or police camp. To stop or stem these attacks, even more troops were moved into the valley. There were now bunkers on every street corner in Srinagar. The Indian army had become "an imposing and ubiquitous pressure" in Kashmir, even "a parallel government." (Guha 644)

Due to this volatile situation, the extremist groups saw an opportunity to create enmity between the two religions. They thought it would be easier for Pakistan to bid for Kashmir if there are lesser Hindus in it. They were encouraging the supporters of Azadi to break the brotherly relation between them and the Pandits:

In the winter of 1989-90, as the Hizb-ul supplanted the JLFK, the pandits became a target of attack. Because they were Hindus, and for no other reason, they were seen as agents of



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the state that had long oppressed the Kashmiris. Seven hundred pandits were killed during 1989-90 in ways that made the one who survived insecure. (Guha 642)

Siddharth Gigoo's novel *Garden of Solitude* is based on this historical context. It narrates the story of a Kashmiri Pandit family who had to migrate from Kashmir to save their lives.

Sridar, the protagonist of the novel, had Lasa as his father, whose family had to migrate. But initially he joined those who were protesting against the Indian State as he couldn't think of himself to be different from those who were protesting. He had no idea what was the future of his family would be. He even threw stones at the army, along with other youngsters 'Stone pelting at the army bunkers became an obsession with the Muslim youths. (Gigoo 32)

This shows the relation which both the community had between each other. Sridar could not differentiate between him and others earlier in his childhood days. Though eventually he did understand that he is different from his Muslim friends. He felt relieved when he came to know that circumcision is not for Pandits, but only for Muslims. He said, "Thank God, I am not a Muslim..."(Gigoo 5)

The friendship between Lasa, his father and Ali also show the comradeship that the people of two communities shared. Ali used to give Sridar his books for free. That relationship always remained the same. Even after they had to leave Kashmir, when Sridar returned to his home where he meets Ali again, Ali behaved in the same way with him.

There were a lot of Muslims who didn't want Pandits to leave. Even those who were supporters of Azadi. They imagined a free land with both Pandits and Muslims in it living together as brothers. The politics behind all this was also interpreted by different people in different ways. In the novel those Muslim who didn't want the Pandits to go, blamed the Hindu governor, " 'The



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Hindu Governor has asked them to leave this place. He is the real villain,' another Muslim shouted from the street as he watched the scene unfold" (Gigoo 68).

Gradually, the Pandits started to leave Kashmir. Among the other reasons, there were some political ones too. Bansi Pandit a Kashmiri Pandit writes in his account that the chief minister at that time allegedly incited the Muslim saying that 'Islam is in danger'. Bansi Pandit writes, "This dangerous declaration (coming from the mouth of a chief minister of a secular state) incited the entire Muslim community in Kashmir"(B. Pandit 49).

Lasa, because of the support he got from his friends, was hopeful that he would not have to leave his home. Many of his Muslim neighbours said that they will support them and they won't have to go. Even some of the people who were a member of the separatist organizations said that this is their home as well.

But the situation became tense day by day. A lot of Pandits were targeted and some of them were even killed. For Hizb-ul-Muzahideen all Pandits were informers of the Indians government. They started warning them initially, that if they don't leave the valley, they will be killed. The valley was filled with the chants of Azadi which made the pandits uncomfortable. A lot of them came to meet Lasa and told him that he should not trust any Muslim and leave this place immediately. Lasa said, "Who else can we trust." He still had hopes that the Muslims in his community will support him. Even when his wife said that they should take their neighbour's word seriously, he said, "You must neglect these antics of bystanders"(Gigoo 47).

On one of the days, he saw two men in pherans walking up and down his lane. The fear crept in. This fear was a result of a lot of incidents happening for a long time. The fear which he was going through can be seen as an example of how most of the Pandits were feeling that time. Fear of death, of them and their families. Cultural violence was prevalent. The interaction between people had stopped. The Hindu festivals were not celebrated as earlier. The walls were painted



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with slogans such as, “Pandits must leave. Freedom is ours! The land must be purified.”(Gigoo 43) He then decided to leave.

Sridar wanted to write about the stories of the Pandits. For him, it was necessary to break the silences. The newspaper had no stories carrying out for a long time about them. A lot of things were not discussed. Bansi Pandit writes: “It is not unfortunate that neither mass media took serious note of this atrocious situation, nor did Indian security forces stationed in the valley to protect the Hindus” (B. Pandit 49).

Some of the Pandits have written their account of the torture they went through during the last decade of the twentieth century. They also wrote about the resilient attitude of the pandits while going through this. M.L and T.N Pandit said,

This has been a decade of agony, trauma and for some excruciating pain of hellish living condition, penury, untimely death of dear ones, loss and destruction of property and sources of livelihood. But this has also been a time of fortitude and resilience and our resolve to deal with and overcome adverse circumstances with courageous and purposeful endeavour. (T.N Pandit & M.L Pandit 6)

They suffered in agony. All the attempts of getting a land within Kashmir failed. They are still trying to create Panun Kashmir, a piece of land within the Kashmir region.

As Charles Webel says, “But even so there may also be *suffering in silence*, seeing a predicament as an unavoidable part of the human condition, dwelling in human nature”(18).

This is what they did, they suffered in silence. For Sridar, it was necessary to break the silence. He suffered along with his family and other Pandits in the camp. The facilities were really bad. All the time politicians used to come and mobilize them in their support



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Later he left the camp to live in a room with his family. He frequently visited the camp, he said, “I am accumulating the ammunition’,’ someday I’ll write a story about this.”(Gigoo: 2011: 87)

He recognized the need for writing this story when he met old people in the camp,

“These people will die very soon, one by one, and take with them their memories. The precious stories will be lost forever. Years later, no one would be able to know their identity.”(Gigoo 202)

When he returned to his house. He found himself in an identity crisis. “Home! Would you take me to home...”(Gigoo 214).

There was no home for them. All were like gypsies. Migrating from one place to another for years. His friends were discussing the present situation. He says that it is peaceful now. Gowhar says

This is not peace Sridar. This is only a semblance of normalcy and peace...common people feel betrayed. They are tired of the violence, the bloodshed and the deaths of the children. Their voices stand things given them joy. Freedom is an illusion. It eludes them. The rich and powerful have cheated the poor and the downtrodden. Exhaustion has engulfed the innocent. The rich and the influential are making money while the poor are still chasing a distant dream. (Gigoo 235)

Though there was peace on the surface, there was no peace underneath. This is what is called negative peace. The corruption, killing of people in the name of militancy, capturing them, torturing them for a long time, custodial death, these were and are the condition through the people are going through. The extremist groups like Hizb-Ul or the politicians or those who are dealing with the rehabilitation programs got benefitted by the whole issue. Pandit’s lost their lives, homes, their



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families, a lot of old Pandits died due to ailments, those ailments were caused by the shock they got because they had to leave their houses. Mahanandju lost his memory. But he used to tell his children that they should never try to throw his possessions. Keep them to show them to your children. It is in this tradition, the stories in which the Kashmiri Pandit story will survive. The story of a friendship between two communities which didn't materialize because of the interest of certain groups and political players.

Sridar's life is quite similar to what the writer himself had to go through while migrating from Kashmir. The story tries to cover all the aspects due to which exodus of Kashmiri Pandits happened. The novel doesn't seem to indulge in the communal frenzy which is supposedly tried to be created among the Pandits by some section of the media, Nitasha Kaul says, "An entire generation of Kashmiri Hindus has grown up outside Kashmir in India where they have learnt to identify themselves as Hindus before Kashmiris, in accordance with the right-wing Hindu sentiment of mainstream India. (Kaul 203)

However, there are critics who believe that he didn't get into the depth of the politics of the whole matter: In *Countercurrent*, Amit Kumar writes:

He tries hard to do a balancing act, he narrates the agony of an old Kashmiri Pandits, and in the same vein, he also tries to capture the fear of paramilitary forces under which a young Kashmiri Muslim spends his time. But in this balancing act, in this idea of neutrality, he skips questions which lie at the root of the whole issue. (Amit Kumar)

However, Susheela Bhan writes about such stories of Pandits which breaks the long silence which combines both the past anguish and the future hope. For him, it is a contradiction which is

...reflected by paranoia and melancholia emerging out of a psyche lacerated by an unending stream of antagonism, aggression and perversion, on the one hand, and steeling



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the will to star himself out of his despair and mobilize his inner resources to challenge and seek an alternative to the inchoate social order that has brought him to his nemesis, on the other. (Bhan 209)

In the end, although Gigoo didn't indulge himself into speculating about the reasons behind the exodus, his representation is a combination of firsthand experience and a sense of empathy towards the other religion. His aim seems to be to break the silence and narrate the Pandits story without being vindictive or reactionary due to the hardship through which they had to go through.

It is for the longest time that the mainstream media didn't highlight their issues and Gigoo wanted to start doing that by breaking his silence with the story. Even in the novel towards the end, Sridar expresses his aim for telling the story, "Well! I am on the side of those who can't speak and haven't spoken for age (Gigoo 230).

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