



Midnight's Refugees

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On August 15th 1947 India celebrated its independence in words that were immortalized by Pandit Nehru who was of Kashmiri Pandit descent. The day before Pakistan had celebrated its own. Today both India and Pakistan turn 65.

My maternal great grandfather, at the time of India's independence was one of the most prosperous Kashmiri Pandits in the town of Varahamula in Kashmir. Varahamula got its name from the story that at one time Kashmir was a vast lake. Lord Vishnu assumed the form of a boar and struck the mountain and the water flowed out. The town is located on the bank of the river Jhelum at the highest point of the river.

My great grandfather as a Kashmiri Pandit must have been aware of Varahamula's chequered history and its impact on the Pandit community. Around 1323 Zilchu had entered Varahamula with seventy thousand Turkoman warriors. The chronicler writes that the destruction was so complete that "Kashmir became almost like a region before creation." It was also the entry point for Shah Mir who had entered Kashmir a few years earlier as an immigrant seeking sanctuary and ultimately established Islamic rule in the Valley through subterfuge and murder.

History repeats itself. Unknown to my great grandfather the North West frontier was stirring again. On October 22nd 1947 Pakistan invaded Kashmir by pushing thousands of raiders in. They struck Varahamula. The horrific tale of their attack on the local convent and the people is well documented but less known is that the raiders in their zeal for loot sought out the richest men in town. They identified my great grandfather, killed him in cold blood, dragged his body to the river bank and abandoned it there. In this terror struck time it was the intercession of a Muslim neighbor who arranged and assisted in his cremation. When the bells tolled for independence little did the Kashmiri Pandits know who it tolled for?

During these 65 years a lot of blood has flown in the Jhelum. It is hard to state anything about Kashmir and not find the opposite equally true. But there did seem to be one strategy that sharpened over time, solidified and now has caught Kashmir in its rigor mortis like grip. That strategy was that It Pays to Oppose India. India paid you if you opposed it; the Pakistanis paid you if you opposed India and other third parties such as the Wahabis were willing to also provide inducements. The Kashmiris are no different in their response to incentives and they began to behave in completely predictable ways.

Equally true those who supported India in Kashmir found that they paid for it. The Indian State turned its back on them. Nobody paid more for it than the Kashmiri Pandits who were exiled from their homeland over twenty years ago. The Kali Andhi that spread through Kashmir did not spare even Muslims who dared to believe in the Indian dream. Diversity, Knowledge Acquisition, Economic Independence, Women's rights, Connectivity which Kashmir was famous for and also forms the underpinning of modern India started a downward spiral on India's Independence Day in 1947. Kashmir turned into a vast welfare state that would arouse itself like a somnolent python only when it was ready for a kill. India was the complicit partner that fattened it.

This Independence Day the Global diaspora of Kashmiri Pandits met via a con-



ference. Their minimal resolutions below capture the pitiful state that they have been reduced to in terms of their ability to exercise their rights as Indian citizens. I quote fully-

The Global Kashmiri Pandit diaspora -

- Reminding all concerned parties that Kashmiri Pandits are the original descendants of the ancient peoples of Kashmir,
- Reaffirming that Kashmiri Pandits have inalienable rights in Kashmir,

Noting with satisfaction the recent resolution tabled in the United States House of Representatives by Congressman Frank Pallone; the FBI's arrest of lobbyist Dr. Ghulam Nabi Fai, the Executive Director of the Kashmiri American Council (KAC) and the Kashmir Center, in Virginia; the exposing of Pakistan's Intelligence Agency ISI's role in covertly lobbying US lawmakers and Indian opinion makers; the statement of the Chief Interlocutor on Kashmir that "The litmus test for any political settlement will be the

return of displaced Pandits to their Valley homes with safety and dignity",

Reiterating that Justice delayed is Justice denied and that after more than 20 years the Kashmiri Pandit rights and needs continue to be stonewalled by the concerned governments who are complicit in the extinction of the community,

- The Global Kashmiri Pandit Diaspora Urges all concerned governments to return the operating control of all Kashmiri Pandit temple and shrines in Historic Kashmir and related faith assets to an Apex Trust which will be set up by the Kashmiri Pandits Diaspora. The Global Kashmiri Pandit Diaspora also nominates Mr. Rakesh Kaul from New Jersey, USA to initiate the process of Apex Trust.

- The Global Kashmiri Pandit Diaspora Calls upon the Jammu and Kashmir Government and the Majority community in Kashmir to leave no stone unturned in ensuring that the miniscule Kashmiri Pan-

dit left in Kashmir have full economic opportunity; physical security, the freedom to pursue their way of life and enjoy the full rights guaranteed to them by the Indian and State constitutions;

- The Global Kashmiri Pandit Diaspora Stresses that the Government of India initiate an official commission of enquiry and work closely with the FBI to probe into the linkages of Fai and ISI within Kashmir especially the separatist leaders; seek extradition of Fai after his case and any outcomes thereof comes to an end in the US; request the US to expunge all resolutions on Kashmir initiated in the House of Representatives and Senate by congressman and Senators who have received lobbying moneys from Fai or Kashmiri American Council. A similar inquiry should be conducted to probe similar linkage with Kashmir Council in UK and Brussels.

It is pretty clear that the Government of India and the State Government of Jammu and Kashmir have failed the Kashmiri Pandits. The sweet rhetoric masks the cold reality that the extinction of the Pandit community is the end goal. In this there is an eerie similarity to the Chinese strategy of waiting for the Dalai Lama to die so that the legitimate aspirations and rights of the Tibetan Buddhist community get extinguished. Sure the interlocutors will consider giving a title change so that the euphemistically named migrants may perhaps now be called Internally Displaced People. Whoop te do! Perhaps they will recommend that a bill or two be passed in the State legislature which will have the reassuring title of Minorities Bill since J&K State is the only State in India that to date does not have one. Perhaps there will be a sweeter economic package that will be announced at the time of the upcoming elections. The rulers know that they will put in enough riders so that nobody will sign on and benefit. They will never address or grant what the Pandits want to be able to live in the Valley with security and dignity and enjoy the rights that they are entitled to under the Indian constitution. Having salved their conscience they will move on to pressing matters related to their own entrenchment. They have no feelings for the displacement of the Kashmiri Pandits the feelings are exclusively for resisting their own.

How can you as an Indian make a difference? You the reader know a Kashmir Pandit or two. Next time ask them to open up and share their personal story with you. It will tell you what is happening to one vital arm of our country. Ask them how you can help and make a difference as an Indian? Ask pointed questions from Indian and Kashmiri leadership. If you go to visit Kashmir as a tourist enjoy the land and its hospitable people but also ask the folks where the Kashmiri Pandits are and get past the hypocrisy. You will spend money in Kashmir with the locals as a tourist but keep a fraction aside to donate to the Kashmir Pandit students, the indigenous Kashmiris who are struggling at camps in Jammu. Write to me if you want to send money to a trustworthy organization that is doing yeoman's work with these refugees in their own country.

In this small way you will stand up for the idea of India in Kashmir. In this small way you will also celebrate the true message of the full Jana Gana Mana anthem and the song will resonate inside you. Jaya Hey!!

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