

ONCE WE HAD EVERYTHING

Literature in Exile

Edited by

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For Pandit Birbal Dhar and Mirza Pandit Dhar who sacrificed their lives to save thousands of Kashmiri Pandits during the Afghan Rule in Kashmir in the 19th century.

In memory of the countless Pandits who perished in exile hoping to return to their homeland, Kashmir.

For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead *and* for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.

—Elie Wiesel

Preface to *Night*

For us, history had stopped.

—Primo Levi

If This is a Man

...the survivor makes the prolonged and multiple survival of himself possible in descendants.

—Imre Kertész

PREFACE

THE exodus of Pandits from Kashmir in 1990 remains a blot in the history of modern India. The year 2018 marks the 28th year of their exile. While most Kashmiri Pandits are now settled in different parts of India, several thousands are still languishing in the township for the displaced at Jagti near Nagrota and in other camps in the Jammu province of the J&K state in India. They continue to live as refugees in their own country, still unsure about being able to return safely and peacefully to their homes in Kashmir. Theirs is a life of disenchantment. Their long-cherished desire for a quiet return is still unfulfilled. Even today, they oscillate between despair and hope, and pray for normalcy to return to Kashmir.

Ravaged by three decades of terrorism, militancy and violence, Kashmir continues to be a flashpoint between India and Pakistan. It is witnessing a revival of radicalisation and religious extremism. The displaced and homeless Pandits find themselves caught in a vortex. There has been little progress on their return to and rehabilitation in Kashmir. Their demand for justice has remained unheeded for years. The clamour for keeping Pandits out of Kashmir has grown even louder. They have been forsaken by successive governments and human rights organisations.

They have even been kept out of any meaningful dialogue or consultation. All things that once were theirs—land, culture, heritage, history and home—have been snatched. They have nowhere to go, but they still lay claim to a glorious history, a distinct and illustrious ancestry and a rich cultural heritage, by writing about it.

What kind of a society, a nation are we if we can't even guarantee a safe return of Kashmir's Pandits—an ethnic minority—to their homeland?

Countless Kashmiri Pandits whose voices stand suppressed aren't even in the socio-political discourse of India nowadays. Nobody knows about them and their dignified struggle for basic, simple things of life. How they have lived? What they have gone through? What they have lost? They are the ones who have experienced humanity in its purest form. Despite having lost everything, they have quietly suffered—and nurtured hope. The humanity of such people must be placed before the world so that the generations to come will know the cost these people paid to survive. This book features the stories of some such people.

The young generation of Pandits, born and brought up in exile, is living off an inherited memory. Children born in camps are growing up rootless. What memories will these children inherit and what history will they remember? What will they think of as 'home'? Years from now, these children will discover their roots by reading the stories in this book.

We hope this book will give the readers a glimpse into the condition of the exiled Pandits who still carry the burden of history with them wherever they go. Escape into memory has become a cathartic experience now.

We pray that someday we, the Pandits of Kashmir, will get to reclaim our homeland, Kashmir, and our lost identity. Until then, narrating stories of our individual and collective struggles—who we are, where we have come from, what we lost, what we endured and how we survived—will keep hope aflame in our hearts.

Kashmir is, and will always remain, incomplete without its original inhabitants—the Pandits.

We thank the authors for writing these stories. Special thanks to the translators for translating stories written originally in Hindi, Urdu and Kashmiri. We're immensely indebted to Renu Kaul, Veena Batra and everyone else at Vitasta Publishing for their support and faith. Without their backing, this book would not have been possible.

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Introduction

In the winter of 1990, about half a million Pandits, who are the original inhabitants of Kashmir with a chronicled history of 5000 years, were forced to flee their homes in Kashmir and migrate to Jammu and other parts of India because of the persecution they faced after the eruption of Pakistan-sponsored armed insurgency and terrorism. Those who lingered on in Kashmir for various reasons became soft targets for militants and extremists.

The trouble began in the summer of 1989. Anti-Pandit sentiment prevailed everywhere in the Kashmir Valley. The propagandist broadcasts from Pakistan were disturbing. The streets turned bloody. Protests, crackdowns, anti-Pandit slogans, kidnappings and killings took place unabated. Pandits found their names on militant hit lists. Muslims and Pandits stood divided on religious, sectarian and ideological lines. Suspicion, mistrust and betrayals created partition within the society and human relationships lost their meaning. Euphoria and hysteria prevailed in Muslim households; people believed that Kashmir's secession from India and merger with Pakistan was a matter of days. Inside Pandit households, men, women and children battled fear and uncertainty. Conveniently abdicating their responsibilities towards the Pandit minority, the state government and law enforcement agencies failed to prevent the

atrocities committed against the Pandits by terrorists and extremist elements. In the wake of killings of many Pandits and the threats received by them, no effort was made to ensure their safety and security in the Kashmir Valley.

After fleeing Kashmir in 1990, thousands of Pandits lost their jobs, businesses, land, houses and belongings. Those whose only livelihood came from farming were the worst affected. Everything they possessed was gone. Their lives were reduced to nothing. Left to fend for themselves, the displaced people were forced to take shelter in puny canvas tents and makeshift tenements unfit for human habitation. These places came to be known as Kashmiri Pandit Migrant Camps. In these camps, there was no access to even basic amenities like healthcare, drinking water, electricity and toilets. The general conditions were unsanitary and unsafe. Women, children and the elderly, in particular, lived on the fringes of life. What they got to experience in the camps is indescribable. Loss of privacy, deterioration of human relationships, subsistence on bare essentials, mental trauma, existential crises, disease, deaths... A sense of insecurity and deprivation, fear, alienation, and apprehensions about the loss of identity invaded the lives of people who struggled to survive. Life was full of wretchedness and misery. Unable to cope with the loss, thousands perished in camps. People saw the end of humanism; they saw heaven turned into hell.

The apathy towards the Pandit community was so deep-rooted in the authorities and the government at that time that the displaced children and students were denied admission in regular schools and colleges in and around the Jammu Province. Sensing that the future of youngsters was at stake, the displaced community appealed to the government to pay attention to the needs of children and students, in particular. As a result, in July 1990, 'camp' schools and colleges were set up. Like the camps accommodating the displaced, the camp schools too were nothing but an assemblage of shabby and ramshackle canvas tents erected on wastelands far from habitation. The entire set up was bereft of basic infrastructure. Imagine a school without classrooms, furniture, a library, a canteen, a toilet and a blackboard! Students sat on tattered tarpaulin sheets while the teachers delivered the lectures. When it rained, they didn't know what to do and where to go. Yet, despite the adversities encountered by the displaced people, education wasn't made to suffer.

After completing matriculation and Class 12, most students went to other parts of India (Delhi, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra) to pursue Engineering and technical courses, hoping to be able to secure jobs later so that they would then be able to support their parents. Moved by the sordid state of affairs and the Government's lack of empathy towards the Pandits in the early 90s, Bal Thackeray, the founder of Shiv Sena, instructed engineering colleges in Maharashtra not only to wave off the capitation fee for the displaced

Pandit applicants but also to reserve seats for them. It helped hundreds of students, especially those whose parents couldn't afford to pay for their education and other expenses. After all, people had lost everything.

According to a state government report of 2010, 219 Kashmiri Pandits were killed in the region between 1989 and 2004. But according to a survey conducted by Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti, 650 were killed between 1989 and 2008. Hundreds of temples and thousands of houses belonging to Pandits were plundered and ravaged during the 90s.

The forced displacement of Pandits from Kashmir in 1990 was of the worst kind in independent India. What's shocking is that the pleas of the displaced people went unheard. A human catastrophe of such magnitude went unnoticed and unmourned by the world.

As years passed, the writers among the displaced and homeless Pandits, in despair and in longing, produced articles, short stories, reportage, poems, plays, essays, novels, memoirs and other writings in English, Hindi, Kashmiri and Urdu. The sole purpose of their writing was to let the world know what they were going through.

The literature thus produced had a clear purpose—to draw the world's attention to a human crisis of unimaginable proportions.

Through these writings, which continue to this day, the displaced Pandits gave vent to their grief, anger and their yearning to return to their homes in Kashmir. For them, writing became a vehicle for nostalgia and for expressing their unfathomable dark anguish. Besides, they give voice to the hundreds of thousands of voiceless Pandits who live miserable, pathetic and depressing lives away from their homes. Feelings of uprootedness and homelessness find full expression in these writings. This way, the Literature in Exile took shape in India for the first time since the independence of the country.

The essays and short stories in this book show how the exiled Pandits of Kashmir are imprisoned in strange and difficult situations. The literature illustrates their dissent, despair and hope.

This book is divided into two sections.

Part I: Non-Fiction, features memoirs and personal essays, and

Part II: Fiction, features short stories written originally in Hindi, Kashmiri, Urdu and English. Stories written in Hindi, Kashmiri and Urdu have been translated into English especially for this book.

In *We must leave by the fifth of March*, Arvind Gigoo recounts the societal and political changes in downtown Srinagar, Kashmir, before and during the turbulent period (1980s to the present times), paints a disturbing picture of his struggles in exile and sums up with his reflections on the future of Kashmiri Pandits. 'What will happen to the

Kashmiri Pandit community, its culture and philosophy and allied things?' he asks.

In *Once we had everything*, Siddhartha Gigoo narrates how, despite the loss of home, the exiled Pandits living in camps and in rented accommodations continue to celebrate *Pann*, the festival which marks the end of deprivation and the beginning of prosperity. 'Those who longed to return are long dead. An entire generation of Hindus was wiped out in camps. What's left is the residue. This residue will cast a long shadow over the history of Kashmir,' he says.

In *Who were they anyway, they might ask one day*. Tej Nath Dhar ruminates on how the centuries-old cultural identity of Kashmiri Pandits, along with the question of their status, stands neglected in the current political discourse. 'If things continue the way they are right now, Pandits will certainly become extinct as a community after some time,' laments the author.

In *Mother and exile*, Dr Subhash Kak traces the journey of his mother from her early childhood and youth in Kashmir, to old age in America and Delhi. He also reflects upon the importance of preserving the rich cultural legacy of the great Hindu saints, poets and scholars of Kashmir. 'In a deeper sense, with my Mother's passing, I felt as if my last link to Kashmir, my motherland, had been severed,' mourns the author, remembering his mother's exodus from Kashmir.

In *The March that never came*, Parmarth Gupta pays a tribute to his mother by memorialising the story of her childhood in Kashmir. 'And I know, even today, somewhere in my mother's heart is a lacerating wait—a longing for the 'March' of homecoming,' says the author.

In *Our days in the conflict zone*, Kundan Lal Chowdhury talks about how leaving Kashmir because of the threats from militants and then living in exile shaped his own writings. He also recounts the socio-political conditions that led to the exodus of Pandits from Kashmir in 1990. 'The Kashmiri Pandits are spoken of in the past tense now,' he laments.

In *Son's whereabouts*, Pushkar Nath Dhar narrates an incident about how a father lost contact with his son after migrating from Kashmir. 'Kashmiri Pandits became refugees in their own country,' says the author.

In *A house, but no home*, Varad Sharma reflects on exile, loss and inherited memories of his ancestral home in Akura, Kashmir. He explores how an inherited memory has become his only connection with Kashmir where he can't return. 'Who will protect us from cultural extinction in exile? Will the generation of younger Pandits be able to become the sentinels of the community?' asks the author.

In *The boy who ran*, Khushboo Mattoo recalls the harrowing times when her grandfather was repeatedly made to flee his home in Kashmir due to various incidents—the Peasant Uprising of 1931, the 1947 raid on Kashmir by Pakistani tribal militias, Pakistan’s attack on India in 1965, the communal riots of 1986, and the outbreak of militancy in 1990. ‘In the summer of 1991, the militants abducted Bobji. He was detained at a secret place for three days,’ narrates the author.

In *The keys to a house not there*, Pratush Koul remembers his first-ever visit to Kashmir to see his parents’ house. ‘These people were homeless. Once they too had houses. Now, all they were left with were keys to houses that were not there,’ he writes.

The village of vacant houses is Seema Bhat’s tribute to her village, Haal, where she goes after twenty years as a tourist. ‘I long for the beautiful past to return,’ says the author.

In *The home I dream of returning to*, Nipa Charagi examines the idea of ‘home’ by reflecting upon the losses incurred by her, her family and relatives due to their migration from Kashmir. ‘The taste and flavour of home is stashed away in a plastic bag in the fridge containing dried vegetables; in the side compartment is a tiny, transparent box of saffron,’ she ruminates.

In *Lost window*, Neeraj Santoshi recollects the stories narrated to him by his grandfather. 'I remember looking at the rain one afternoon through the window of my ancestral house in Kashmir. My grandfather, Tathya, was telling me a story about a King who had lost his kingdom,' he recounts.

Examining the literature produced by Pandits in exile, Agnishekhar, in *Literature in exile*, reveals how Pandits, like Jews, wrote about the holocaust-like conditions they faced after being expelled from Kashmir. 'We have sown the seeds of Exile Consciousness Movement in Indian Literature,' asserts the author.

In *Things we left behind*, Kirti Kaul recalls the night of terror that forced her and her family to leave everything—a home, priceless belongings, a way of life—behind and embark on a one-way journey to a place they could never call 'home'. 'The larger question still remained unattended! Where do we go?' asks the author.

Harikrishna Kaul's *Finger* depicts the love-hate relationship between two friends—one a Muslim and the other a Pandit—in conflict-ridden Kashmir. 'My dear brother, outsiders as well as our own people fooled us... I mean... fingered us. Pakistan and India cheated us,' says the protagonist.

In Henna Koul's *The rented house and the flat*, a girl looks at old photographs and sees her past and present come alive and collide. 'We are alone in this old age. We have no one to talk to, no one to share our feelings with,' says a man in a photograph.

In Chandrakanta's *A tale of the Satisar*, Lalli has not forgotten Reshi Pir, Chrar-e-Sharif, Shankaracharya Temple and Tulla Mulla Mandir. The story presents a panoramic view of a joint family that is torn apart due to migration. 'Losing your home is like climbing on to a pyre or lying down in a grave while you are alive. Only someone who has lost a home can appreciate the real meaning of home,' says Lalli.

Moti Lal Kemmu's *A tale of the animals* is an Orwellian allegory set in conflict-ridden Vananchal in which wolves and jackals conspire to evict the meek deer from their caves. 'Leave Vananchal to the jackals. No one will save you,' says an old jackal to the deer.

Maharaj Krishen Santoshi's *Akanandun* (the only son) is a modern day retelling of a nineteenth century folktale in which a couple's only son, who's supposed to be handed over to a Yogi after turning twelve, is killed by militants. 'Your beloved Akanandun has been killed. He will never come back now,' says a woman to the Yogi.

In Autar Krishan Rahbar's *The shadow*, a man who's unable to come to terms with the loss of his home in Kashmir, due to the

religious persecution faced by Hindus, talks to his constant companion—his own shadow. ‘My tongue was paralysed. I froze. My shadow clung to me,’ says the narrator.

In Khema Kaul’s *The city of pain*, a man narrates a horrifying experience of going to Kashmir to retrieve his sister’s belongings. ‘People thought that I was waving to them whereas I was waving at my deserted lifeless house,’ says the man.

In Kishni Pandita’s *Wedding album*, a woman takes her daughter to Kashmir and discovers that her old wedding album that she had thought was lost forever has been preserved by her old Muslim neighbour. ‘First you should see what I have for you and then you must decide whether you would like to take it or not,’ the neighbour says to the woman.

Based on a real incident, Shilpa Raina’s *The last cry* is a heartrending story of a girl who witnesses the brutal killing of her grandfather on the day the entire family is to leave their home in Kashmir. ‘I immediately rushed to the spot and brought him here. I poured some water into his mouth, but he was dead by then,’ says the girl’s father.

In Monika Ajay Kaul’s *The mirage*, a girl tries to understand why her family is being forced to leave Kashmir. ‘You must leave tomorrow.

Other Pandits from the neighbourhood are leaving too, and we shall see you soon,' says a neighbour to the girl's family.

In Sushant Dhar's *Avenged*, a Pandit boy travels to his old village in Kashmir to mourn the death of the father of his childhood friend—the very friend who once had justified the killing of the Pandit boy's brother. 'They don't kill innocents. They don't kill without reason,' mourns the exile.

In Deepak Budki's *The informers*, militants kill an elderly couple and the newspapers justify the killing by accusing the couple of being informants. 'Do whatever you think is right. But please hurry. We may not have much time left,' the wife says to her husband, sensing the threat to their lives.

In Adarsh Ajit's *The world cup*, a hockey match played between India and Pakistan divides Hindus and Muslims on the lines of religion and nationality. 'Electricity went out. TV was gone. And we did not watch that goal,' says a Pandit man after seeing a Muslim man cut the electric wire to prevent people from watching the match.

In Rajesh Kaul's *The last rites*, a man performs the last rites of a woman who dies after her family abandons her. 'I got an obituary published in the newspapers, hoping that her family would see her

photograph and come for the last rites. But no one came,' laments the narrator.

In Rinku Koul's *Father and son*, a man is unable to attend the cremation of his own father. 'We cannot wait for his arrival,' says the son-in-law after getting to know that the dead man's son can't make it to the cremation.

—The Editors

Our enemies did not cross the border
They crept through our weakness like ants.

—Nizar Tawfiq Qabbani