

Intangible pressures in Jammu and Kashmir

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History, inheritance and uncertainty affect the experience of being male, young and displaced in Jammu and Kashmir.

Since 1989, the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir has been embroiled in a conflict between the Indian state and a nationalist movement that seeks the independence of Kashmir. Among the casualties of this conflict, it is estimated that 140,000 to 160,000 Kashmiri Pandits, the Hindu minority of Kashmir, were displaced from their homes at the beginning of the conflict. Since 1990 these people have been forced to relocate to Jammu in the southern part of the state and eventually to different parts of India. A significant minority live in camps which have become part of the urban landscape of Jammu city and environs in the past two decades.

The Pandits are provided assistance by the Indian state as Indian citizens, though the official term for displaced persons in the regions is 'migrant'. There has been relatively little consideration of issues pertaining to youth in the community. For an older cohort of male youth, difficulties in securing the means of providing for their families may impinge on their sense of self-worth, while teenage boys suffer from the pressure of demands placed upon them by families, peers, political institutions and their location.

The burden of aspirations

The Kashmiri Pandits have historically been associated with power in the region, having been prominent landowners in the past and employed in state bureaucracies in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods of South Asian history. The Kashmiri Pandits also share a long history of migration from Kashmir to different parts of India, contributing to an image of the Pandits as a community of influential élites associated with middle-class professions in and outside Kashmir. To be a Kashmiri Pandit is to be educated, well mannered and engaged in professions such as the bureaucracy, teaching and other middle-class occupations. Work involving physical labour is seen as undesirable by Pandits.

The image of having enjoyed a certain quality of life before displacement circulates among Kashmiri Pandit youth. There is a strong sense among male youth in particular that their elders had enjoyed some measure of a full life, owning property, enjoying the benefits of uninterrupted education and access to secure professions.

Displacement, however, has upset this life-plan. This applies especially to male youth in late adolescence and early adulthood who belong to families hit severely by displacement. Many are to be found in camps, unable to finish their schooling or, having completed school, unable to attend university and professional courses. As a result the gulf between their immediate circumstances and realities and their aspirations is considerable.

Sunil, who grew up in a camp in Jammu, had been apprenticed at a printing press following the completion

of his schooling. He was proud of his work and yet aware of the way it might be seen by others:

"I didn't go to college. I am uneducated. But I got into 'technical work'. I had to learn how to do this work. But the guys of my age feel ashamed to do this work... They all feel ashamed to do physical work."

While some would see Sunil as someone who has taken charge of his life, he is angry that he can never achieve those ideals that he had aspired to as a Kashmiri Pandit.

Moral conflict

The problem of aspirations takes a gendered turn. Parents may criticise their children – particularly their sons – for not providing for the family either by working or completing their studies. In turn, men, especially in their twenties who were very young children when displaced, are critical of their fathers for deciding to re-locate to a city such as Jammu which lacks opportunities. In Jammu, there is an overwhelming sense of the camp as a negative space and a far cry from the homes they have left behind. Moreover, this image of the camp as a negative place also taints its inhabitants. Many local people, including state officials, speak of Pandits living in the camps as demanding, untrustworthy and prone to occasional misbehaviour. Teenage boys and young unemployed men are often subject to the greatest criticism. Groups of boys ambling through the camp or young men sitting by a corner are perceived as examples of bad behaviour, accused of idling away their time and harassing women. However, such behaviour can be seen in any settled community in any part of the world and reports are often exaggerations. In any case, some of the teenage boys would emphasise that there is very little for them to do.

These concerns risk being internalised by displaced youth who may begin to see themselves in negative terms. Many young men often speak of the ill effects of displacement by pointing to misbehaving children. Many older men emphasised that they were raised to be mild, observant of etiquette and to avoid any kind of conflict. However, for many younger Pandit men who have grown up and have come of age in exile, a different value begins to emerge. One youth insisted that, unlike their fathers, they will be more expressive in their anger. This perhaps can be seen on the political front where Pandit activists – who emphasise that they are loyal citizens and supporters of India, unlike Kashmiris in the valley who demand independence from India – criticise the Indian state for having betrayed them.

A sense of the past plays out in everyday life in other ways. For many Pandit youth, particularly those who constitute the poorer section of the community, problems of unemployment often make it difficult for young men to contemplate marriage and become householders who can support families to achieve a certain quality of

life. Some young Pandits are able to escape by going to university and may then seek employment in relatively well-paid sectors in the economy. But this may affect peer relations and friendships, resulting in a divide between Pandit youth who are able to secure a relatively better future and those who remain left behind. This is reflective of a larger discourse among displaced Pandits; while they insist that a sense of community exists, most people are left to fend for themselves and there is little help they can expect to give to or receive from others.

Young men who have lived in the camps and have married complain that they are affected by restricted space. The accommodation in the camps for displaced Kashmiri Pandits was the basic 'One-Room Tenement', a space 9 feet by 14 feet which is allotted to one family irrespective of the size of the family. These limitations of space impose significant pressures on values of domesticity and privacy and on conjugal relations. Not only have young men spoken of the impact of such pressures on their sense of physical and emotional well-being but also older men complain that the lack of privacy serves to 'corrupt' younger members of the household, which leads to further conflict between youth and their elders.

Between 2008 and 2011 the camps for Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu were gradually closed down and their populations have been accommodated in a single new residential colony on the outskirts of the city. Unlike the old camps with their one-room tenements, the new colony consists of three-storey apartment buildings. The new colony is regarded as an improvement and it will be interesting to see the changes it has on youth dynamics. Nevertheless, existing pressures remain. Rohan, a young man, had moved temporarily to a large southern city; for a long time he had wanted to leave the confines of Jammu and realise his ambitions and hopes for a better life. When the state government of Jammu and Kashmir announced an employment package for displaced Kashmiri Pandits in the state sector, his family insisted that he return to Jammu and apply for a position which promises job security in a time of economic difficulty. Such pressures affect the ability of Pandit youth to remake their lives.

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