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Media Narratives: The Kashmiri Pandit Story

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Abstract

While the media industry has been often criticized in the sense of bias and sensationalizing, it can be evinced that most of the narratives that inform the consciousness of the people are spun from the figments of media reports that have emerged across time and space. The world today is a saturated space with images and stories of variant kind that attribute meanings to a particular event or identity. In case of minority cultures, this formulation of identity overlaps with the mediation brought forth by the facets of religious affiliations, community, political ideologies and gender roles that pervade in the society. The condition of the Kashmiri Pandits in the contemporary parlance and the perspectives of opinion surrounding them in terms of what happened and is happening, is of critical importance. The paper is an attempt to understand the milieu of reporting as seen both in the old media, new media and social media.

Keywords: *Reporting Minority, Media, Ethnic identity, Kashmiri Pandits*

Introduction

The present-day mediatized society is juggling around in their conscious and their unconscious, a series of representations of life as generated in the media. The context of the media revolution has increased the analytical scope of life writing. The interdisciplinary approach to life writing, inclusive of what scholars term as the “new media life writing”, makes it a possibility to analyze the dialectics of representation in a society saturated with visual images. In recalling the various images, the complexity of the representations, the reader or the spectator consumes them and becomes current within that particular culture. Valerie Alia and Simone Bull in *Media and Ethnic Minorities* (2005) argues that media,

...has created unprecedented opportunities for the ethnic minorities to communicate their worldviews, their cultural products, their commerce to a global audience. On the

other hand, facilitates unauthorized reproduction and dissemination of digital images...thus enables the ongoing exploitation of the ethnic communities. (104)

The reasons accounted for this will be that behind these representations is the framework of power relations that engages with every construct in the society and the nation, at large.

The Kashmiri Pandits as an ethnic group in the Kashmir valley have been much debated in terms of their 1990 exodus from the valley and the consequent uprootedness. The precarious situation that is present in the state has been worsened by a convergence of a number of fundamentalist factions to explore it to their advantage rather than the rejuvenation of Kashmiriyat. While the people have been time and again claiming the creation of a home where both the communal groups live in peace, the practicalities of it are far from hopeful. However, these divisions are troubled again by the manipulated yet elaborate media narratives on the present and the past of the group, the notions of their social space and cultural identity.

With tainted politics of the BJP and PDP led coalition government, continued ethnic conflict, militant insurgency along with the 25 years of ASPA brigade in the Valley, the media have considered it an essential point of discussion in the recent months. For years since the exile, the narratives of the Pandits have not been included in the political discourse until now. The media, the term essentially covering all the bases from old media to new, has a new found enthusiasm for Kashmir as such. From the print media to television to twitter, every single mode has been made use of to create a narrative of Kashmiri Pandits. The media itself has now attributed the term “forgotten refugees” to the Pandits, revealing in the process the old media’s failure in the past, as a meaning -making agency in its lack of considerate journalistic endeavours. Years after exile, the narratives, mediated and unmediated, have found its way into popular consciousness.

While the media narratives in print, particularly in the form of books, journals, newspaper articles have made way in the deliberation on the issues of conflict in Kashmir, it has been the new media, especially social media platforms that have given a voice for the Kashmiris, especially the Pandits. The fictives of Rattan Lal Shant, Radhika Koul, Parineeta Khar and non-fictional writings of R.N.Kaul, Indu Kilam, Shaleen Kumar Singh, Ajay Raina, to name a few, occasions where they report themselves have been conformed to the space of the Kashmiri Pandit enthusiasts. Urvashi Butalia’s *Speaking Peace: Women Voices From Kashmir* (2002), Siddhartha Gigoo’s *Garden of Solitude* (2010) and Rahul Pandita’s *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013) have transcended the boundaries to be part of the larger picture because of their brilliance in narration and their modern tactics of publication to popularize the books in social media and online. The others, however, have not been read as tales rising from the ashes of a group whose mental make up has been burnt-out. Similarly, those written by Kashmiri Muslim writers like Basharat Peer’s *Curfewed Night* (2010),

Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* (2011), Shafi Ahmad's *Shadows Behind the Ghost Town* (2014) are also popular presentations of the Kashmir conflict owing to the recognition in new media.

The narratives in televised media however reverberate with the masses unlike the literary pieces which kindles the thoughts in the literary circle. Television and cinema prevail as powerful formative tools of information, knowledge and power. With twenty four hours of local, national and international disclosures and reports, offering variant perspectives often veiled by the political biases of the channels, a protracted matter of contention as Kashmir with active agencies of competing nationalisms-India, Pakistan and Jammu Kashmir, partaking in the process of creation of the history of the state. Within these again are manifold perspectives, based on ethnic and geographical divide. The media narratives of Kashmir and Jammu pull at different directions.

The linchpin of the Indian media has been the political facade and the militancy related violence, turning a blind eye towards the human rights violations against Kashmiris, both the Muslim and the Hindu population. As expressed in the forthcoming narration:

There were people dying everywhere getting massacred in every town and village, there were people being picked up and thrown into dark jails in unknown parts, there were dungeons in the city where hundreds of young men were kept in heavy chains and from where many never emerged alive, there were thousands who had disappeared leaving behind women with photographs and perennial waiting ,there were multitudes of dead bodies on the roads, in hospital beds, in fresh martyrs' graveyards and scattered casually on the snow of mindless borders.(Waheed 56)

Scholars believe that the Indian nationalist perspective, mostly unquestioningly depicted, promotes a one-dimensional view of events, and helps earn the various agencies moral victory while the pitiable condition of the rehabilitation camps of the Kashmiri Pandits are deliberately sidelined. Such relegation to the margins can actually count as an implicit anti- Pandit narrative. Images of army men protecting the people of Kashmir endure any other image. The greatest counter terrorism offensive, Operation Sarp Vinash claiming to have killed hundreds of terrorists, demystified as nothing but a hype in a controversial article, entitled "The Hype and the Folly" by *Frontline* journalist Praveen Swami reveals the extent of cleverly weaving other narratives, only to procure the nation's attention. The political handling of the militancy has worsened the already muddy waters. By banning the Islamic television channels, the government has aided in opening wide the rift between the Kashmiri Pandits and the Kashmiri Muslims .DD Kashir, formed to counter the Pakistani propaganda focuses on Kashmiri culture, leaving out the essential need of the hour of exposing the cases of rape, harassment, brutal killings of the refugees as well as the natives. However, when the discourse on the Kashmiri Pandits is actively committed on the social networking platforms, it coerced the old media

to take up their issue. Television considered the matter for a few active days before it became passive remembrances or rather would be in the future as the witnessed by the volatile nature of it. However, through debates, discussions, interviews, the Kashmiri Pandits have now been given the some if not all the essential space to engage in revelation of their anxieties and concerns and opinions on rehabilitation and healing of the wounded memories.

Indian cinema's ideological potential and cultural possibilities as a mainstream medium has been recognized and controlled. Since it shapes public mentality, the dynamics of representation in the motion pictures are of vital importance to the analysis of the relentless affliction of the Kashmiri Pandits. The movies noteworthy of analysis are Ashok Pandit's *Sheen* (2004), Onir's *I Am* (2010) and Vishal Bharadwaj's *Haider* (2014). Much before its release, *Sheen* caught world wide attention when it was screened at the United Nations Human Rights Conference in Geneva in 2004. The first Hindi commercial movie, depicting the plight of the Pandits, it offers a tragic narration of the Pandit perspective of the atrocities they were subjected to and still are. This movie has not been able to garner public attention as done by *I Am* and *Haider*. The reasons being their already established directors acclaimed for their intense portrayal of a subject matter and released during a time when is an integral part of the political discourse. Onir's *I Am* encompasses four short films, of which *I Am Megha*, moves away from the proverbial narration and includes the losses incurred by the community of Kashmir as a whole. *Haider* has been often tagged a anti-national movie for its take on the conflict, which the Pandits claim have been pro-militant. The movie has been banned in Kashmir for its desecration of the Pandits' ancient Sun Temple by misrepresenting it as a devil's den. Short films also cast the serious fix the state is in. Rajesh Jala's *23 Winters* (2013), Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Last Day* (2013), Deepak Ganju's *The Lost Paradise* (2012), Vivek Sinha's *Praznath* (2013), are the few short films that generated narratives of the Kashmiri Pandits.

The most visible form of accounts and compelling reports feature in blogs and social media platforms. *Kashmir blogs* and *Kashmiris in Exile* highlights the contemporary concerns and the unsettling nostalgia the people in exile live through. They feature the bitter life of the refugees, the loss of a vibrant culture, the brokenness of their identity and the loss of access to artifacts that are entwined with their narrative. The interactive capabilities of the new media have triggered a continuous dialogue, particularly on Facebook and Twitter. *Kashmiri Pandits*, *Kashmiri Pandits - Fight for Justice*, *Kashmiri Pandits -Life and Culture after Migration* establish the various narratives of the Kashmiri Pandits in the virtual space. From photographs to videos, from the written narratives to the documentations uploaded, the presence of the threads of these narratives have been instrumental in the articulation of the counter narratives that are critical to the evolving ethnography of the Pandits from the source. While the former, as in the case of blogs, do not attract a majority audience, the

latter, as in the case of the social media platforms have garnered more attention. Despite all these, the counter narratives are definitive in the contemporary milieu in not only offering dynamic platforms to voice their opinions but also become statements of change that could offer new meanings to the Kashmiri Pandit story.

In effect the multiplicity of the narratives and viewpoints elaborated in discourse has posited manifold opportunities for the Pandits, the people of Kashmir and the political and civil society agencies to devise a workable solution. However, this awaits a time when people on all sides will overcome the mundane religious and political issues and be human.

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