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**Kashmiri Refugee Narratives: Displacement, Trauma, Identity, and the Politics of Belonging**

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**Abstract:** Kashmiris became refugees in their own homeland after the 1947 partition of British India. Subsequent wars and the 1990s insurgency made their lives miserable and compelled them to live in refugee camps. They seek refuge across the Line of Control (LoC) area between the Indian and Pakistani refugee camps in different areas. They were forced to migrate across the border areas of the Jammu region and POK, where they tried to find shelter and safety for their family members. These refugees are insecure in their camps and uncertain about their future generation. They are psychologically traumatised and suffer psychological trauma, stress, fear, anger and PTSD. Due to their temporary settlement, inter-generational trauma has now been generated among these people in their own homeland. Their narratives include the border stories, traumatic memories, testimonies, literary works, and cultural expressions through which they articulate their experiences of exile, loss, identity, trauma, and belonging. This paper analyses the experiences of their displacement and exile, also to investigate the psychological impact, and examine how refugee narratives articulate their traumatic memories. These narratives emerge from various communities affected by conflict and displacement, including Kashmiri Muslims (*Muhajir*), Sikh refugees, and West Pakistani refugees, displaced by violence along the Line of Control, and members of the Kashmiri Pandits who were displaced from the valley at the time of insurgency. This study tries to compare the narratives of different displaced communities as refugees. Their narratives can be viewed as sites where identities are continuously negotiated across borders. The focus of this qualitative paper is to portray the life narratives of Kashmiri refugees, the dilemma of statelessness, and their humanitarian discourse in contemporary time.

**Keywords:** *Refugees, Narratives, Dilemma, Identity Crisis, Insecurity*

**K**ashmiri refugees are individuals or communities who have been forcibly displaced from their homes due to war, armed conflict, political violence, and cross-border tension. In South Asian scholarship, the term also refers to people who were displaced during and after the 1947 Partition, the subsequent India–Pakistan wars, and later conflicts, particularly those who crossed the Line of Control (LoC). Kashmiri refugee status is inherited (Robinson 348). “Memory emerges as the structural and foundational link between the first-generation survivors, who share testimonies and the second generation, who inherits this haunting legacy. They narrate and write about their inherited legacy of loss and violence” (Pathak 54). Their first, second and third generation suffered and face human rights violations and seek refuge across the Line of Control (LoC). It has been more than 75 years since Kashmiri refugees were deprived of basic fundamental rights.

Mass displacement of people pushes them into confined spaces and limited freedom. They are forced to live uncertain lives in refugee camps who have an existential crisis without their homes in the deterritorialized territory of Kashmir. Since the 1947 partition, they have gone through political, social, educational and economic hardship. Both nations (India and Pakistan) hosted many Kashmiri refugees during the 1947 partition and during several wars. These refugees are internally displaced people across the LoC; therefore, international agencies such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) did not identify and recognise their crisis. Kashmiri refugees remained deprived of UNHCR assistance and recognition. This fragmented population of refugees is living below the poverty line and has not found appropriate political representation. Kashmiri refugees do not fall within the definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Sultan 21). The dominant power politics threaten this refugee population. Therefore, they were unable to emerge as a collective voice for their common cause. They are excluded from the global refugee population. There was no concrete planning for their rehabilitation and proper settlement. This paper is to discuss the border dilemma and understand the current pathetic situation of Kashmiri refugees across the LoC and several parts of the homeland.

Abha Chauhan's (2022) study aims to comprehend the social, economic, legal, and political challenges faced by West Pakistani refugees as well as their fight for fundamental rights. Neil Krishan Aggarwal's (2007) paper investigates identity, culture, and suffering with a displaced Kashmiri Sikh living in a camp settlement in the Jammu and Kashmir state. By analysing the global environment in which "Kashmiri refugees" live, Robinson's paper investigates the emergence of a regional refugee regime, and he explains how treaties between India and Pakistan allowed the "Kashmiri refugee" to become a separate political topic inside the South Asian

refugee system. Reeta Chowdhari Tremblay's (2016) research focuses on two different kinds of displacement that took place in 1947: the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir Displaced People (PoKDP) and the West Pakistan Refugees (WPR). This literature review highlights these ignored refugees' sufferings. Sultan (2022) looks at how the complex structure of the Kashmir dispute distinguishes these Kashmiri refugees from other types of refugees and also examines the main issues that refugees of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir in camps deal with, including housing, work, education, and subsistence allowance. Bilal Ahmed Mir (2025) investigates the intricate historical, sociopolitical, and economic elements that contributed to the KPs' widespread movement during the insurgency. By reviewing the literature, this study found that no particular study is available which analyse and compares the various types of Kashmiri refugees.

Initially, the first phase of Kashmiri refugees' migration was in 1947-48 across the LoC. Hindus migrated to the Indian side of Kashmir who are known as West Pakistani refugees, and Muslims migrated to Pakistan-administered Kashmir who are called *muhajeer*. By the name *Muhajir*, these marginalised communities are segregated and differentiated from their native people. Legally and technically, the West Pakistan Refugees (WPRs) are not 'Refugees' (Chauchan 3). According to the Jammu and Kashmir Constitution, they did not fall under any class of state-subject or category of state permanent resident. Partition refugees were not considered under the purview of the international community because the movement of Muslims to Pakistan and Hindus to India was not accompanied by any loss of nationality. Robinson argues that “refugees are ‘deprived of their nationality’ had the effect of excluding displaced people who could be argued to have multiple claims on nationality—effectively, people displaced by post-war decolonization” (Robinson). These partition refugees lose their land to the other side of the border. After crossing the border, they beg for food, shelter, and clothes. Some shifted along with their relatives, and the rest lived in temporary camps.

Many Kashmiri refugees are residing in POK camps in Kotli, Bagh, Mirpur, Poonch, Palandari Wala, Mang Bajri and Muzaffarabad, and the rest live in Jammu camps such as Bakshi Nagar, Rehari, Karan Nagar, Keerian, Gangyal, Manwal, and Kishanpur (Sultan). Sharma argues that displaced people are repeatedly uprooted, expelled and relocated in different areas, forcing them to live insecure and uncertain lives. These are unprotected populations, not just because their liberty has been snatched, but also because they cannot restructure the national community in camp life. One of the testimonies from this camp is that of Mohd Haneef, a Muhajir for 26 years, who said, “This *zameen* (land), where we have placed our tents, belongs to someone else; therefore, even if we want to build a house here, we cannot. Having no land is the biggest problem for us. If the landlord comes today and asks us to vacate this place, we cannot do

anything because this land belongs to him and not us.” (Sultan 15). The refugees acquired land for their livelihood, which was either state land or Evacuee Property (EV), which was abandoned by Muslims who fled to Pakistan.

The second large-scale migration occurred between 1965 and 1971 during the war between India and Pakistan. It was the period responsible for the creation of refugee streams and large displaced groups (Hans). The border dwellers of Poonch, Rajouri, Kapwara and Baramulla districts were forced to migrate to the other side of the LoC without family consent. Many neighbours were wiped out during wars between the two nation-states (India and Pakistan). Refugees can be divided into two categories: (A) Migration from the Kashmiri-speaking belt, mainly from the urban areas such as Srinagar, Baramulla, Pulwama, Badgam, Kupwara, Islamabad (Anantnag) and Shopian. (B) Migration from Gojri, Pahari/Hindu speaking belt (mostly families) chiefly from the areas adjoining the Line of Control (LoC) area of Rajouri, Poonch etc. Mass migration happened because of unsettled borders left over after Partition. As per rough estimates and information that has been emerging from Government sources, nearly 6500 to 7000 families were uprooted from the Chamb area of Jammu (Sagar).

The third wave occurred during the insurgency in Kashmir, especially during the last 15 years (1990-2005). Most infiltration occurred during this phase, so the government started constructing a barbed fence boundary to restrict the *darandazi* (infiltration) and a "Pass Law" to control the people's movement across the LoC (Rahman and Ershad 47). Meanwhile, the government imposed AFSPA during the 1990 insurgency, which allows the military forces to conduct search operations without native consent across the LoC. Native homes are searched night and day, the night curfew is imposed immediately after sunset, and fence gates are closed by the military across the LoC. Kashmiri refugees of 1990 crossed the LoC and live their chaotic life in POK refugee camps, who never come back to their homeland. The legal status of Muhajir-e-Jammu and Kashmir through an issued Muhajir Card, also known as a Refugee Card (Sultan 21). The circumstances made their existence hell. The current living conditions of Kashmiri refugees seem like *homes away from home*, and they are located *here and there* in their own homelands (Saffran).

Now the question arises: Do the Pandits qualify as refugees? Whether KP are accepting this imposed identity of refugees within their own homeland. Many Kashmiri Pandit families are still living in their different camps in Jammu town. They are labelled as Internally Displaced Persons (IDP). They lived in Nagrota, Muthi and Mishriwala camps in Jammu. “Narratives of massacre of women and children, of abductions of whole families and mass suicides by women wanting to escape sexual abuse and of corpses flowing down the river Jhelum” (Hans 22). They are

internally displaced and cannot claim refugee status. The Indian state labelled them as ‘migrants’, which they do not accept. Even though the Pandits have benefited from a relief program that offers them food and financial assistance, as well as shelter in specific camps and colonies for some, they still find the term "migrant" offensive. Their livelihoods, homes, and lives have all been lost. They lament the uncertain future in Kashmir and elsewhere and express nostalgia for the lives they left behind there. K.L Choudhary rejects accepting the ‘migrant category’ for the Kashmiri Pandits who are living in the Camps.

Moreover, Kashmiri Pandit fiction writer Rahul Pandita tries to portray the agony and suffering of their community in their homeland. He says in his work *Our Moon has Blood Clot* (2013) that “We are very scared ...Where would we run away to? Would Ma have to kill herself? What about my sister?” (59). He conveys the sense of loss pervaded the Pandit consciousness in Jammu – “We had lost everything – home, heath ... which had taken generations to build” (76). One of the survivors from Jammu camp says that “*Beta, hum kuch nahi laaye the, sirf yaadon ke alava*” [Son, we did not bring anything from the valley except remembrance] (Pathak 41). Another testimony from a Pulwama district refugee camp in Jammu narrates that “The dark dingy lanes of Mishriwalla refugee camps which hardly provide enough space for even two persons to walk across them simultaneously, lead us to his one room house. One Room Tenement (ORT) given by the state government, as there has been not a single window in any of the rooms constructed here. Perhaps a prison could have been better than his caged room in Mishriwalla refugee camp” (KPN). Emerging poet from Kashmir Umza Falak says in her poem

We know the pain of erasure.../We, who outran our destiny. /We, who cradle the  
 ache of an unsung longing, a lingering history./We, who bear the burden of  
 outliving our children...We the elegists of night. /We the bards of loss (lines 10...  
 20).

These lines express the collective grief, displacement, and historical trauma experienced by Kashmiris and the “pain of erasure” refers to the gradual disappearance of a people's identity, culture, language, and presence. The verb “cradle” suggests holding something precious yet sorrowful. The “unsung longing” is the unspoken desire to return home, reconnect with lost roots, and recover a fractured identity. “A lingering history” indicates that the past refuses to disappear. By calling themselves “the elegists of night,” the speakers become chroniclers of darkness, suffering, and death. By describing themselves as “the bards of loss,” the speakers suggest that their stories are no longer tales of victory but narratives of exile, displacement, bereavement, and cultural survival.

Another Kashmiri Pandit, P.L.Kaul depict the trauma of homeland in his poem “Home” as “I had a Home /There in yonder vale /Under the blue Sky /And green all around...I recalled those yesterday...greed and hate possessed the inmates...Alas enemies within destroyed the home”

The speaker remembers the beauty of Kashmir as a peaceful homeland but laments how internal divisions, hatred, and violence destroyed that cherished home. “Yonder vale” refers to the beautiful valley of Kashmir, renowned for its mountains, rivers, and lush greenery. The “blue Sky” and “green all around” symbolize peace, natural beauty, prosperity, and emotional security. The speaker looks back on the past with deep nostalgia, remembering happier days before violence and displacement transformed the homeland. The poet suggests that they became consumed by greed, hatred, intolerance, and communal divisions. The speaker mourns that the homeland was destroyed by “enemies within”—those who belonged to the same society but allowed hatred, extremism, political conflict, or communal violence to tear it apart. The word “Alas” conveys profound sorrow and regret, emphasizing that the loss of home.

Kashmiri refugees face an identity crisis and recognition: Firstly, the *Muhajir-e-Kashmir* gained recognition within the South Asian refugee regime. They got some recognition in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, where the local government provided them with shelter, food, and clothes temporarily. The POK government issued them Muhajir cards for basic necessities and job reservations. There were 24 seats for ‘muhajir-e-riyasat-e-Jammu-o-Kashmir’ in Indian side of Kashmir. Now the population was divided between two nations as a result of partition, these positions were always vacant in every election. Robinson argues that the South Asian refugee regime's paradigmatic resolution of refugees into citizens was inverted; people displaced from the Jammu and Kashmir territories had to remain categorically refugees to maintain their historical rights in the princely state, which in turn gave them rights to be resettled as refugees; they were citizens because they were refugees (55). Ather Zia, in her poem “One Lazy August Afternoon from a childhood in Kashmir”, writes: “All homes were empty of men, /and young lads detained /in verdant meadows turned prisoned” (lines 1-3).

These lines depict the devastating impact of conflict, militarisation, and state repression in Kashmir. The poet highlights how ordinary life has been disrupted by arrests, detentions, and the creation of a sense of collective trauma and insecurity. Because of insecurity, men have disappeared from their homes due to arrest, detention, and enforced disappearance. Verdant meadows” represent the lush green fields of Kashmir, traditionally associated with beauty and peace.

## Sikh Refugee Crisis in Kashmir

Kashmiri Sikh refugees are members of the Sikh community of Jammu and Kashmir who were displaced from their homes because of political instability, armed conflict, militancy, and insecurity in the region. The histories of Sikh refugees from Jammu and Kashmir revolve around their brutal uprooting from areas such as Muzaffarabad, Mirpur, and Poonch during the 1947 tribal assaults. The migration of Sikh refugees since the Partition of India in 1947 is a major chapter in the history of South Asian displacement. Their displacement forms an important but comparatively less discussed part of the broader history of the Kashmiri diaspora. Krishna Mehta, in her memoir *Kashmir 1947: A Survivor's Story*, “traces the attack on her home, her escape with her children, and the terror that gripped civilians as order disintegrated. What distinguishes her narrative is not only the violence she witnesses but her attention to the everyday textures of fear: children separated from parents, and women navigating survival in captivity” (*The Hindu* 2025).

Kashmiri Sikh refugees are a relatively small but historically significant community within the broader history of displacement in Jammu and Kashmir. As a small minority, they have often been overlooked in discussions of Kashmir's displacement history, despite experiencing insecurity and episodes of targeted violence. Singh Sahib, a 45-year-old man, resided in one of the older settlements for displaced people in Jammu. There is a general feeling of mental and physical abandonment in the camps. He says, “We left in 1947 after relatives were killed. We left in 1965 after Pakistan attacked us at night. Our “plus point” is that we returned and stayed there” (Aggarwal 1665). Rafiq Kothwari says in the poem “Driving Lolita in the World's Most Militarised Zone”:

Memory now is muteness.../ A soldier speckled pellets on the face... /Half-widows wailed...we are all lifeless here... / At zero Bride / lilacs by bunkers bloomed (lines 15...21).

These lines convey the profound trauma of conflict in Kashmir, portraying a society marked by silence, violence, grief, and resilience. The poet juxtaposes images of brutality with those of nature to demonstrate how life continues amid suffering. The poet suggests that memory has become silent because the pain of violence is too overwhelming to express. Survivors carry memories that cannot easily be spoken. The verb “speckled” evokes the image of numerous tiny pellet marks covering a person's face, leaving permanent scars or causing blindness. The face, a symbol of identity and humanity, becomes disfigured by violence. The term “half-widows” refers to women whose husbands have disappeared in conflict but have not been officially declared dead. These lines express a sense of emotional death.

After the insurgency, artist Vir Munshi narrates that “I have lost my landscape.../my colours.../my brush only paints the images of the exile now” (lines 14...24). These lines express exile, displacement, memory, and loss of homeland. “I have lost my landscape” refers not merely to the loss of a geographical place but to the loss of home, belonging, cultural surroundings, and identity. The landscape represents the lost homeland, Kashmir and “my colours” symbolize the richness and vitality of the homeland. The brush becomes a metaphor for poetry and memory. “The images of the exile now” reveals the painful transformation of the poet’s creative vision. These lines suggest that exile does not erase the homeland from memory; rather, it transforms the homeland into a remembered and imagined landscape. “There is no doubt that every Kashmiri has suffered because of the turmoil, be it a Hindu or a Muslim. We, Kashmiri Pandits, suffered outside Kashmir and Kashmiri Muslims suffered inside Kashmir” (Pandita Rohit).

As we know, every native citizen of Jammu and Kashmir must have a permanent resident certificate, which is considered a state subject and is mandatory for a citizen who has land in Jammu and Kashmir. Kashmiri refugees were deprived of Permanent Resident (PR) status, and they had no citizenship in their homeland. After the abrogation of Article 370, the Permanent Resident status was abolished and replaced with domicile status under the Jammu and Kashmir Grant of Domicile Certificate (Procedure) Rules, 2020. Land ownership rights to West Pakistan Refugees. In 1954, they were given 46,666 kanals (2360 hectares) of land by the state government in Akhnoor, Samba, Hiranagar and Kathua districts, but they were not given legal ownership. They could not own land, cast a vote, contest a state assembly election or claim other benefits because of their refugee status. For more than seven decades, their demands were ignored by regional parties. In 2018, the state govt. issued an identity certificate allowing these refugees to be recruited into central security forces and the army (Hafeez 02).

The humanitarian conversation around Kashmiri refugees focuses on the politics of return, long-term internal displacement, and legal classification gaps. In India, Kashmiri Pandits who were uprooted from the Valley between 1989 and 1990 are officially categorised as migrants or internally displaced people (IDPs) rather than international refugees, which restricts their access to certain international protection frameworks. The families are still grieving the loss of their ancestral homes as they temporarily live in two-room tenements in multi-story buildings. Without direct supervision from organisations like the UNHCR, people who fled across the Line of Control endure unique camp difficulties and transitional living situations.

The rehabilitation of Kashmiri refugees is a complex process involving resettlement, livelihood, housing, education, compensation, preservation of cultural identity, and the possibility of return to the homeland. The question of rehabilitation remains closely connected with the larger

question of return and resettlement. Rehabilitation is therefore not simply economic assistance; it also involves the restoration of security, property, community life, and cultural belonging. Immediate assistance, such as food, shelter, healthcare, and financial support, is a basic right and need.

The rehabilitation of Kashmiri displaced communities is a multidimensional and uneven process. It is an ongoing process rather than a complete one. While state measures have attempted to provide financial assistance, employment, housing, property protection, and political or legal integration, material rehabilitation does not necessarily resolve the deeper problems of homeland loss, cultural dislocation, memory, identity, and belonging. The identity crisis of West Pakistani refugees, Kashmiri Pandits, and Kashmiri Sikh refugees can be compared through their shared experience of displacement, loss of homeland, cultural dislocation, and the struggle to reconstruct a sense of belonging. However, their experiences should not be treated as identical because they emerged from different historical and political circumstances. Their identity dilemma can therefore be understood largely through the tension between memories of the lost homeland and the process of establishing permanent belonging in the place of resettlement.

Their displacement therefore produces a continuing tension between Kashmiri identity and life in exile. The identity crisis of Kashmiri Sikh refugees adds another dimension to the comparison because their identity combines Sikh religious identity with Kashmiri cultural and regional belonging. Their displacement raises the question of how a community can preserve its Kashmiri connection after moving away from the Valley while simultaneously maintaining its distinct Sikh identity. Their experience can therefore be examined through minority identity. Yet the nature of their identity crises differs according to the historical cause of displacement. The West Pakistani refugee experience is primarily rooted in the Partition rupture and subsequent resettlement, while the Kashmiri Pandit and Kashmiri Sikh experience a dilemma during insurgency. The three communities negotiate similar questions of homeland, memory, cultural continuity, belonging, and identity reconstruction. Their experiences consequently reveal that refugee identity is neither fixed nor homogeneous but is continually reconstructed between remembered homeland and lived reality in displacement.

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