



Spatial Dislocation and Memory: The Exile and Fractured Topography of Kashmiri Pandits

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Abstract

The 1990 exodus of the Kashmiri Pandit community from the Kashmir Valley represents a profound intersection of forced migration, cultural geography, and memory studies. For an indigenous minority whose religious cosmologies, language, and cultural psyche are intrinsically tied to a specific alpine landscape, forced exile constitutes a radical, traumatic uprooting. This paper utilizes Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space and Marianne Hirsch's framework of post-memory to examine how physical dislocation disrupts *Kashmiritat* (the syncretic Kashmiri ethos). By analyzing historical accounts, oral histories, and exile literature—specifically Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* and the elegiac poetry of Agha Shahid Ali—this study explores how a displaced community resists cultural erasure. It demonstrates that when a physical territory is lost, memory is weaponized and romanticized to construct a "portable, mental archive," transforming a lost geographical landscape into an enduring site of cultural resilience.

Keywords: *Spatial dislocation, Kashmiri Pandits, cultural geography, post-memory, Kashmiritat, exile literature.*

Introduction

The relationship between space, place, and the construction of human identity is foundational to cultural anthropology and geography. Space is not merely a blank canvas or a set of geometric coordinates; rather, as geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) posits, a "space" becomes a "place" when it is endowed with human value, ritual, and shared meaning. When a community is violently and suddenly severed from its ancestral place, the resulting trauma extends far beyond the logistics of physical relocation. It shatters the spatial framework that structures collective memory and validates cultural existence.

The mass exodus of the Kashmiri Pandit community in early 1990 offers a poignant and complex case study in this intersection of spatial dislocation and memory. Following a sudden escalation of targeted religious militancy, political assassinations, and systemic intimidation within the Kashmir Valley, nearly the entire minority Hindu population—estimated between 150,000 and 300,000 individuals—fled their homes overnight (Tikoo, 2013).

For the Pandits, Kashmir was not merely a place of residence; it was a sacred, living landscape where topography, language, and theology were inextricably merged. This paper examines how the sudden transition from the temperate, shrine-laden Valley to the harsh, alien plains of Jammu and Delhi fractured the community's identity. Furthermore, it analyses how collective memory, oral traditions, and literature function as survival mechanisms to bridge the chasm between the lost physical space and the contemporary, fractured sites of diaspora.



The dual trauma of dislocation

In the context of the Kashmiri Pandit exodus, the trauma of dislocation represents a spatial collapse where the violent separation from their homeland causes profound ontological, somatic, and existential devastation. This disruption functions as a permanent, intergenerational wound, resulting in a fractured consciousness where memory acts as a "haunted house" separating the physical present from the lost, sacred topography of the past.

Environmental Shock: Alpine Mountain Climate (<25°C) to Subtropical Plains (>45°C) as a result: Heatstrokes, tropical diseases, physiological breakdown.

Architectural crush: Multi-story Sprawling "Ghar " to Single-room Canvas Refugee Tents as a Result: Complete loss of privacy, erosion of traditional hierarchies.

1. The Sacred Topography: Space as Identity Before 1990

To comprehend the magnitude of the trauma inflicted by the 1990 exodus, one must first analyze the unique degree to which Kashmiri Pandit identity was mapped onto the physical geography of the Kashmir Valley. Unlike the broader, pan-Indian traditions of Hinduism, the religious and philosophical matrix of the Pandits—deeply rooted in Kashmiri Shaivism—is hyper-localized and ecologically grounded (Madan, 1989)

2. The Trauma of Spatial Dislocation: From Valley to Plain

The physical transition during the winter of 1990 was marked by a radical climatic, environmental, and architectural shock. Moving overnight from the alpine, temperate ecosystem of the Kashmir Valley to the scorching, arid plains of Jammu and Delhi caused severe psychological and physiological trauma that deeply complicated the experience of exile.

Post-Memory and the Phantom Landscape

As more than three and a half decades have passed since the exodus of 1990, a critical generational shift has occurred. The lived, direct memories of the first generation of exiles are transitioning into what Marianne Hirsch (2012) defines as "**post-memory.**" Post-memory describes the relationship that children of survivors or exiles have with the cultural or collective trauma of their parents—experiences they did not live through themselves, but which were transmitted to them so deeply that they constitute memories in their own right.

The younger generation of Kashmiri Pandits, many born or raised entirely outside the Kashmir Valley in urban centers like Mumbai, Bangalore, or across the global diaspora, experience their homeland through a unique "phantom limb" syndrome. They have inherited an intense sense of grief, an acute political consciousness, and a deep longing for a geography they have never actually inhabited.

For this generation, Kashmir exists primarily as a hyper-real, mythologized space. They engage with their roots through digital archives, community YouTube channels, family memoirs, and closed social media groups. This reliance on mediated memory constructs a virtual, portable homeland.

However, this dynamic introduces a profound existential tension: a deep yearning for a specific geographic space that, due to decades of political transformation, demographic shifts, and the physical decay or sale of their ancestral properties, no longer exists as it does in the stories of their elders. They are caught in a liminal space—fully integrated into a globalized economy, yet carrying an inherited, backward-looking ache for a lost paradise.

Literary Cartographies of Loss: Pandita and Ali

The trauma of spatial dislocation and the subsequent reliance on memory are vividly articulated in the literature produced by the Kashmiri diaspora. Analyzing these texts reveals how narrative structure can mirror the fragmented topography of exile.



Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013)

Rahul Pandita's memoir provides a visceral, first-hand account of the spatial transition from Srinagar to Jammu. Pandita uses architectural details to anchor his trauma, charting how his family's sense of dignity was systematically dismantled as they moved from their large, comfortable home in Kashmir to a damp, single room in Jammu infested with scorpions.

Pandita's narrative does not move in a clean, chronological line; instead, it is structured around spatial flashbacks. A description of a harsh summer afternoon in Jammu routinely breaks away to a memory of the cool breeze coming off the Dal Lake. Through this fragmented style, Pandita captures the psychological state of the exile, whose physical body is trapped in the present space while their mind remains permanently anchored in the lost past.

Agha Shahid Ali's Elegiac Topographies

Though Agha Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri American Muslim poet, his collection *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) captures a universal, syncretic sorrow regarding the destruction of the shared Kashmiri landscape (*Kashmiritat*). Ali's poetry frequently addresses the departure of his "Pandit friends" and the ghost-like emptiness of the homes they left behind. In his poem "Farewell," he writes:

"At a certain point I lost track of you / You needed me, you needed to perfect me... I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me."

Ali's work maps the collective grief of both communities onto the physical ruins of Kashmir—its burning bridges, its silent post offices, and its desolate streets. His poetry demonstrates that the spatial dislocation of the minority community simultaneously resulted in a profound psychological dislocation for the landscape itself, leaving it culturally fractured and incomplete

Conclusion

The 1990 exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits demonstrates that displacement is not a singular historical event, but an ongoing, intergenerational crisis of space and memory. The physical loss of the Kashmir Valley fractured a highly localized culture, transforming a deeply rooted community into a scattered diaspora.

However, through the conscious preservation and transmission of memory, the Kashmiri Pandit community has managed to successfully deterritorialize *Kashmiritat*. By encoding their physical geography into portable religious replicas, detailed oral histories, sensory culinary traditions, and evocative literature, they have ensured that their homeland survives as an enduring mental archive.

While a safe, mass physical return to the political realities of the Valley remains complex and uncertain, the spatialization of memory remains the community's most potent tool of resilience. It serves as enduring proof that while a people can be forcibly removed from their land, the land cannot easily be erased from the consciousness of its people.

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