The Kashmir Pandit Tragedy

Why in News?

It has been 30 years since the Kashmir Pandit tragedy happened in which the exodus of the Valley's minority Hindu Kashmiri Pandit community from it took place.

What fuelled the Hindu-Muslim rift in the Valley?

- The following were the factors that had fed into the Hindu-Muslim polarisation in India over the years.
    1. The hotly contested circumstances of the community's departure between January and March 1990, the number and
    2. The issue of the community's return.
- This polarisation by these factors in turn fuelled the Hindu-Muslim rift in the Valley.

What happened before 1990?

- In the lead-up to the events of 1990, Kashmir was in ferment.
- **Political instability** - The leader of the National Conference (NC) Farooq Abdullah won the 1983 election.
- But within 2 years, the Centre broke up the NC, and installed Ghulam Mohammed Shah as Chief Minister.
- This led to huge disaffection and political instability.
- In 1986, as opposition to the Shah government grew, Farooq Abdullah, was made the CM.
- **Religious interventions** - In 1986, after the Central government opened the Babri Masjid locks to enable Hindus to offer prayers there, ripples were felt in Kashmir too.
- In Anantnag, there was a series of attacks on Hindu temples, and shops and properties of Kashmiri Pandits, blamed on separatists.
- **Militancy** - The J&K Liberation Front (JKLF) stepped up its activities.
- The hanging of the militant leader Maqbool Bhat in 1984 added to the sense of foreboding.
- The rigged election of 1987 after which Abdullah formed the government was a turning point at which militants took the upper hand.
- The 1989 submission to the JKLF set the stage for the next decade.

- By then, the Pandits had begun to be targeted.

What happened on January 19, 1990?

- By then, the Farooq Abdullah government had been dismissed and Governor's Rule imposed.
- According to accounts published by many Kashmiri Pandits, there were threatening slogans over loudspeakers from mosques, and on the streets.
- Speeches were made extolling Pakistan and the supremacy of Islam, and against Hinduism. The Kashmiri Pandit community decided to leave.
- **The flight** – In January 20, the first stream began leaving the Valley with hastily packed belongings in whatever transport they could find.
- **The massacre** - In January 21**,** the CRPF gunned down 160 Kashmiri Muslim protesters at the Gawkadal Bridge, the worst massacre in the long history of the conflict in Kashmir.
- **Effect** - The two events (the flight of the Pandits and the Gawkadal massacre) took place within 48 hours, but for years, neither community could accept the pain of the other, and in some ways, still cannot.
- According to some estimates, more than 70,000 of 75,343 Kashmiri Pandit families in January 1990, fled between 1990 and 1992.

What is the role of the administration?

- **Governor** - In the exodus, more specific is the role of the newly appointed J&K Governor, Jagmohan.
- The Kashmiri Muslim view of the exodus is that he encouraged the Pandits to leave the Valley and thus gave a communal colour to what was until then a non-religious Kashmiri cause.
- The Kashmiri Hindu view is that the Kashmiri Muslims drove them out with a vengeance in a frenzy of Islamism that they could not have imagined even months earlier.
- The truth may have been somewhere in the middle.
- **Special Commissioner** - Wajahat Habibullah was the then Special Commissioner (1990) of Anantnag under the J&K government.
- Habibullah told that the Pandits could hardly be expected to stay when every mosque was blaring threats and members of their community had been murdered.
- He asked Kashmiri Muslims to make Pandits feel more secure.

What appeal did Habibullah make to Jagmohan?

- He asked Jagmohan to telecast an appeal to make Pandits stay in Kashmira, assuring their safety on the basis of the assurance of the Anantnag residents.

- But, no such appeal came, only an announcement that to ensure the security of Pandits, 'refugee' camps were being set up in every district of the Valley is what was made.
- Other commentary has pointed to how the government organised transport for fleeing Pandits so that they could get to Jammu.

What happened to the question of return?

- The fleeing Pandits did not think they would never return to the Valley.
- But as the situation in Kashmir spiralled into a full-blown militancy, return began to look remote if not impossible.
- Those who had means rebuilt their lives elsewhere in the country or went abroad.
- Successive governments have promised that they will help this process, but the ground situation has meant this remains only an intention.
- There is an acute realisation in the community that the Valley is no longer the same that they left behind in 1990.
- Now, Kashmiri Muslims see the return of Pandits as essential, but reject the idea of their settlement in secured camps as a replication of Israel-like Jewish settlements in the West Bank.
- Yet their return looks as difficult as it ever did.

Source: Indian Express

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