

## Perceived Discrimination, Acculturative Stress and Social Isolation among the Displaced Kashmiri Pundits: A Qualitative Exploration

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Migration to other places can be both voluntary and involuntary. It can be as a result of natural and man-made disasters and even for recreation, trade and learning. But the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pundits in early 1990's was catastrophic involuntary migration to Jammu, Delhi and other parts of India which led to a mass cultural transformation of the community and in particular to a significant amount of life stress and the acculturative stress. The sporadic return of young Kashmiri Pundits for jobs witnessed a different form of acculturative stress in Kashmir after their return. The present exploratory study represents this ethnocultural acculturation and accommodation of rehabilitated Kashmiri Pundit migrants living in transit colonies in Kashmir. **Method:** The nature of exploration warranted a qualitative method focus group discussion for in depth understanding of the context of the subject under exploration. **Results:** The results which emerged from the data reflected a pattern of psychological and ethnocultural concerns of the community. The community witnessed Perceived Discrimination, Social Isolation as well as Acculturative Stress. The results strikingly reflect an urgent intervention to address their genuine psychological concerns which emphasize upon offering interventions at the policy making level in addition to social engineering so that the wide gulf between the majority and minority communities can be addressed. These and other results along with appropriate suggestions have been discussed. **Limitations:** The current study focused on the limited aspects of the topic and on a very less selected respondents. **Conclusions:** Despite limitations, the study is a unique study of its kind which addresses an important area of concern in a unique cultural setting of Indian Administered Kashmir. The conclusions provide valuable insights into the ethno-cultural fabric. The conclusions point towards the Perceived Discrimination, Acculturative Stress and Social Isolation among a less researched ethnic group in Kashmir. The detailed conclusions in light of the topic have been discussed.

**Keywords:** *Perceived Discrimination, Acculturative Stress, Social Isolation, Displaced Kashmiri Pundits, Qualitative Exploration*

The process of acculturation refers to the changes in a cultural group or individual as a result of contact with another cultural group which results as a response to a changing cultural context (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). It is closely associated with enculturation

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which refers to learning of one's own culture as a part of cultural acquisition. The meaning of the term "acculturation" is wider than just "individuals having different cultures come into continuously into first hand contact" but the individuals who are of the same culture and have been living apart for a considerable time and then plan to return yet they find it hard to adapt to their own culture due to the fact that they are born and grown up in a different culture altogether and thus their primary culture becomes entirely new culture. They then find it harder to assimilate and accommodate even to their parent culture. The term "acculturation" has undergone a lot of change since it was conceived in 1880, (Powel, 1880). John Berry, (1977) opined that the learning in both acculturation and enculturation result into meaningful behavioural, psychological and social changes which individually and at group level transform the basic culture of the one who migrates to the second culture. In the present context a mass exodus of a religious minority as a result of perceived or actual threat to the life and property of the sojourners was the prevalence of the internal displacements from the violent political stir of 1989 to 1995.

The region of Kashmir has a distinct yet unique culture which had the potential to assimilate the majority and the minority traditions prior the outbreak of violent conflict in 1989. The Kashmiri Pundits who are the old residents of Kashmir valley are the part of Saraswat Brahmin community of the Pancha Gauda Bramana groups of valley of Kashmir, (Brower & Rose, 2016) form a sizeable religious and ethnocultural minority share these cultural norms and tend to affiliate with the majority in most of the ethnocultural traditions. This being the reason that migrant Pundits experienced enormous life stress and acculturative stress. They found it hard to assimilate into the Hindu majority Jammu and other places in India, Gandotri, (2011).

The long suffering and loneliness in transit camps in Jammu, other Indian states and abroad, Kashmiri Pundits face a threatening challenge of preserving their ethnic identity, Kaw, (2004). Yet they have tried their utmost to preserve their cultural ethos, language and identity despite all odds. In a relatively recent arrangement to initiate a process of rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pundits back to Kashmir valley, jobs were offered to young Pundits in Kashmir under different schemes in order to ensure their return to valley. The situation for their return to valley remains doubtful even today yet considerable number particularly young Pundits returned after getting employment and live in transit colonies purposefully built for them.

The scenario has changed, "Kashmiri Pundits are neither Indians in Jammu nor Kashmiris in Kashmir" since their exodus and now their partial return. An exploration of their attitudes and perceptions are inevitable particularly when they live in their own homelands confined with a colony of one hundred and thirty households. These migrants were highly confused as how they should behave in the culture they migrated to in early periods of migration due to their sudden exodus because at the first instance sojourners experience a lack of such normative information and guidance regarding how to think and behave in that culture. Similarly, they even were highly confused as how they should behave when they live in transit colonies after their sporadic return for jobs. This information vacuum often leads to a significant amount of life stress, Berry & Kim, (1987).

Acculturation is to be distinguished from culture change because it represents a single aspect of acculturation in one or both the cultures (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits (1936). acculturative experience as a major life event that is characterized by stress, demands

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cognitive appraisal of a situation, and requires coping strategies (Berry, 1997). In the process acculturation, contact, conflict and adaptation are important ingredients while first is important and the last is inevitable and the second is probable, but the conflict phase renders the non-dominant group in extreme stress but gradually the conflict stage passes and the groups tend to stabilize following adaptation Berry (1985). The Kashmiri Muslims and Pundits have over the course of thirty years reached to adaptation and now an endeavour to undo the past tragedies is evident. Similarly changes can be witnessed in the mental health status of the acculturation from separation through integration and assimilation, the groups tend to adapt and look for a way forward, Kim & Berry, (1985).

Research so far has focused on the stress model of acculturation in order to deal with its problematic aspects. The concept of acculturative stress was proposed by Berry (1970) and defined it as *a response by people to life events that are rooted in cross-cultural contact* (Berry, 2005). These reactions tend to include the severe forms and levels of depression and anxiety or what is called as culture shock (Oberg, 1960), which some researchers use synonymously. In the case of voluntary immigration, the impact of acculturation is likely to be lesser than involuntary immigration (Poppitt & Frey, 2007; Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006). Duration of stay in the host culture again, and language inability is also associated with acculturative stress (Hadley & Patil, 2009). The Kashmiri Pundits' migration was as a result of perceived threat and involuntary, therefore it is inevitable that a collective hatred towards the dominant cultural group could be witnessed yet the young Kashmiri Pundits who live in transit colonies since 2010 have assimilated and accommodated. Moreover, the language similarity could have facilitated the adaptation.

This acculturative stress among this community has not been studied in Kashmiri cultural context and therefore the present study endeavours to highlight the severe acculturative stress among the Kashmiri migrants who returned to valley as a result of rehabilitation process and due to the scarcity of such studies, general literature on migrants was examined to understand the inferred acculturative stresses of new arrivals to the valley after around 25 years of stay in second culture.

Research has indicated that discrimination and in particular Perceived Discrimination is associated with adverse mental health outcomes and acculturative stress, Toress, Driscoll and voell, (2012). Similarly Social Isolation has been found to be the common symptoms of the acculturative stress, Johnson, and Sandhu, (2007). People who are the victims of either forced migration or the perceived threat to life and property tend to find it difficult to assimilate and gain confidence of the parent culture on return. This scenario makes them either vulnerable to actual humiliation or inferiority feelings in their entire acculturation process. The reactions of the participants can be feelings of hyper vigilance, anxious reactions and racial discrimination which brings in the inferiority feelings, Carter and Forsyth, (2010).

### **METHOD**

The present study used a micro-level qualitative research design which attempts to *increase one's understanding of why things are the way they are in the social world*. Since migration and acculturation is completely a psycho-social phenomenon, it becomes imperative to study it qualitatively. In the present study Focus Group Discussions were used as a method of data collection. *Focus groups are panels, facilitated by a moderator, who meet and discuss for a specified time period to exchange ideas, perspectives, knowledge, and opinions on a*

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*particular topic under investigation.* In order to generate themes from the data the discussion questions and the prompts were formulated prior to the execution of the Focus Group Discussions.

The study participants were taken purposefully using a criterion-based purposive sampling strategy, Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006). Two groups of people, each consist of 12 members for the ‘Focus Group Discussions’. The participants in one group were entirely men, in the second group the participants were women. The participants were directly approached with a prior appointment sought and common place was agreed from the dwellers of transit colonies of Kashmiri Pundits.

The FGDs were conducted between 15<sup>th</sup> May to 20<sup>th</sup> of May, 2019 after giving the briefing and taking the consent from the participants. A male moderator was selected for the Focus Group Discussion of men and a female moderator was selected for the Focus Group Discussion of women, in order to minimize the response bias. The measurement bias was minimized by selecting participants who were unknown to each other, thus to avoid the peer pressure for the responses and experiences. The free flow of the responses was ensured and even the FGDs and interviews were terminated for a break of ten minutes in between for the minimization of the procedural bias. The audio recording of the focus group discussion was attained and were transcribed by initially translating from Kashmiri and Urdu into English. A coding scheme was developed by the intensive analysis of the responses and reviewing the tape recordings and the subsequent transcriptions of the focus group discussions keeping in view the objectives of the study. Memos were written, and the similar responses clubbed in memo writing giving numbers to iterative responses. The quotes for all the transcripts were compiled, including the description of patterns and themes that emerged from the coded quotes. The patterns and the themes were further deeply explored in order to guide the final manuscript. The results and interpretation was arrived at by resorting to Thematic Analysis. The manifest and latent thematic analysis was used for interpretation of the results.

**Table 1: Socio-Demographic Information of Study Participants**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Total Number of Members</b>	<b>Average Age</b>	<b>Members Migrated along Family</b>	<b>Members Migrated without Family</b>	<b>Duration in transit colony</b>	<b>Job Status</b>
Group I Men	12	31 Years	10	02	08 years	Govt Employee=11 Jobless=01
Group II Women	12	26 Years	07	05	08 years	Govt Employee=07 Jobless=05
Total	24	28.5	17	07	08 Years	Govt Employee=18 Jobless=06

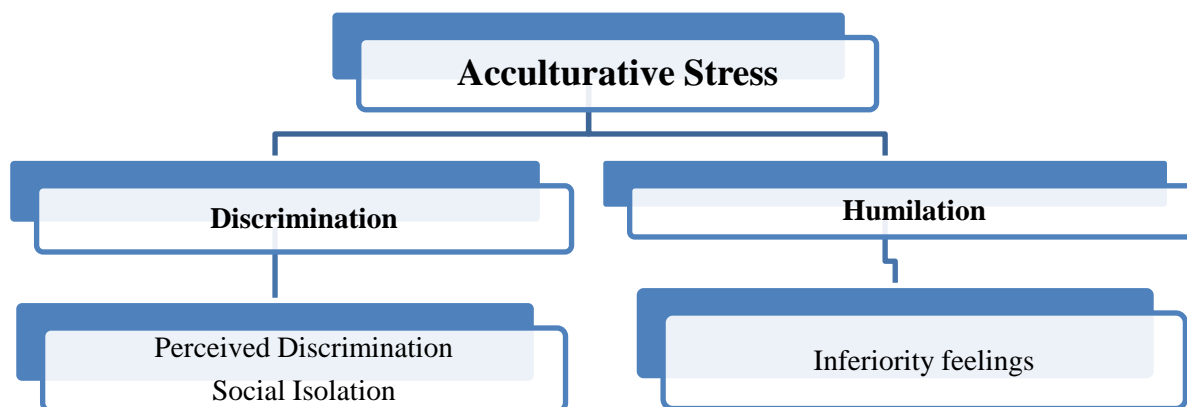
**RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

All the respondents expressed fairly honestly their perceptions and assessment of their suffering due to their mass exodus and their stay in dense and hot transit camps with poor living conditions. In order to get the deep level of understanding about the present context,

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general and specific prompts were formulated prior to execution of FGDs. Overall, two broader themes emerged from the transcriptions i-e Discrimination and Humiliation. Under discrimination three sub themes emerged i-e Perceived Discrimination and Social Isolation. Similarly, under humiliation inferiority feelings were witnessed. During the entire course of report of results, pseudonyms were used to guard the identity of the respondents. The following picture depicts the thematic flowchart:

*Figure 1: Depicts the thematic flowchart of the study*



### **Acculturative Stress**

Generally the causes of stress arise due to finances, relationships and health related issues yet some specific and novel situations tend to present special challenges to the dwellers who find it hard to adjust to new and extraordinary situations. One such situation is stress acculturation among the displaced Kashmiri Pundits who equate their rehabilitation and resettlement as a new form of migration. As Sunil mentioned in a selective excerpt of the FGD:

*Every life event or a change in it brings stress with it. The stress is doubled rather manifold when you're asked to resettle to a place which proved horrifying at the time of our exodus. We felt extreme stress to resettle in a transit colony as if we were having a mass migration once again, but we had no option but to come back because of the job which we were offered on our return."*

Since the migrant resettlers are mostly young entrants to government service, adolescents in particular are found to be more susceptible to experiencing acculturation problems (Poppitt & Frey, 2007; Williams & Berry, 1991). Yet the duration of the acculturation may also affect the process of acculturative stress, Hadley and Patil, (2009). For the resettlers who came back as part of the government plan to resettle displaced Kashmiri Pundits in transit colonies near their native residence or localities prior to 1989 had more acculturative issues because the young ones who came back were either very young or even unborn at the time of mass exodus therefore they had to restart a new acculturation process with native dwellers.

### **Discrimination:**

It is "a negative action toward a social group or its members on account of group membership" (Jones, 2002, p. 8). It may refer to an outward response to prejudicial feelings

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in the workplace or school. The prejudicial treatment the displaced Kashmiri Pundits (who returned as part of the government's plan to resettle in Kashmir) experience due to their religio-cultural identity has a relatively long history. The participants believe that the mass exodus as a result of armed struggle which started in 1989 was not the first of its kind. They had to migrate each time there was foreign invasion in medieval and modern historic times. There has not been a perceived discrimination from the native majority community but from the administrative level they have been subjected to structural discrimination. There have been conflicting anecdotes from the participants about discrimination as they believe that there is widespread discrimination from native population but from the young generation only. The elder population treated them with love and unparalleled care.

### Perceived Discrimination:

Almost all the study participants were unanimous in reporting discrimination both Perceived and felt in their acculturation process. Participants specifically mentioned about the administrative and structural discrimination against the resettled group of displaced Pundits. As Nandita talked about the perceived discrimination,

*“We perceive the structural and administrative discrimination against us as neither the government official provide us the transfer facility, nor they identify the land for transit colonies which could be built as the current colonies have been built in hurry and these colonies are not the pucca structures. Moreover, the salary heads for migrants is specified separately and mostly is haunted by procedural delays”.*

Perceived discrimination among the migrant population results into misuse of human capital and violation of human rights, causing forms of acculturative stress in newcomers. Perceived discrimination is also positively associated with immigrant status and depression, (Finch, Kolody, & Vega, 2000). These results have also been supported by (Williams, Spencer, & Jackson, 1999).

**Social Isolation:** Participants manifested a severe form of social isolation in Kashmir particularly in transit colonies. It is important to mention that participants do not feel isolation from local elderly population but from young generation particularly post-millennials. General social isolation is widespread as reported by Mohit,

*“Since our return in transit colonies, only elderly people interacted emphatically with us and even visited. Some invited us to their homes yet others do often call us but we couldn't see such unconditional love and support from new generation especially people born post 1995 and rightly so the reason may be they're unaware of Kashmiri social fabric. It is disheartening to know that their elders have failed in transmitting the cultural ethos to their young ones. It is not only the problem of the majority but our own problem also as our young ones also find it overwhelmingly difficult to assimilate and accommodate with the parent culture. As a result our new generation is also reluctant to live back in their native places”.*

These feelings were expressed around twenty out of twenty four respondents. In yet another selective quote from the FGD of women group,

*We live in a transit colony as if we are jailed in a confinement where outside world is alien to us. We have to observe the behavior of the native majority community, if they are emphatic we may feel easy to mix up with them but if they are conservative then we may feel socially isolated. Although we find people very cooperative at our work places*

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*but they seldom visit in transit colonies as if they fear us unconsciously and we too fear to visit them in their localities”*

Social isolation and social exclusiveness is the outcome of any conflict and it compromises the psychological wellbeing of the victims as well, (Arthur, 1998; Bratter and Eschback, 2005).

### **Humiliation:**

It is imperative to mention here that being a migrant require individuals to come to terms with the meaning and possible consequences of this social category. When individuals are categorized as migrants, they may have to deal with representations of being an intruder to the place of migration and when they return back it is likely that they may be considered as a traitor, Timotijevic & Breakwell, (2000). The traitor in the present context, of the fact that the majority community in Kashmir was also suffering on account of quelling the mass uprising when the Kashmiri Pundits left or as some believe that they were spared by their exit as a well planned design from the government of the time (Ahmed, 2017).

During the process of acculturation, the experience of humiliation is constant and recurring in almost all the interactions between sojourners and dominant culture members. Even though the impact of acculturation is likely to be lesser in voluntary immigration (Poppitt & Frey, 2007; Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006), the level of marginalization, or separateness, can escalate or ameliorate stress. (Williams & Berry, 1991).

The participants asserted that they have time and again since, 2010 felt humiliated and marginalized of being a refugee in their own homeland. The humiliation was obvious due to their constant feelings of perceived inferiority as can be understood from the following excerpt,

*“We live in a refugee camp in our own homeland, it is a constant humiliation and we believe that whenever we go to market for buying the household items, we are always respected out of way, we’re given special care mostly from the majority community yet we want an acknowledgement of the fact that the place belongs to us too, we don’t want that people should have mercy on us instead we want our own honour restored” but it’s not safe to go to our own places as the situation has not improved yet but these transit colonies can be turned into open colonies where the houses of majority community also exist. This is the solution to this issue of rehabilitation process”.*

As Sunita Further says,

*“We want to be respected; we want to overcome the inferiority feelings in our life here as we feel inferior to our counterparts in workplaces. We have the lack of self esteem and self confidence and living in such inferior feelings is hard. The only solution seems to me is that we may be given a fairer land in Jammu division alongside the Hindu majority community or permanent colonies for us seems a workable solution”.*

The above excerpt is representative of the majority view among the participants as all 24 participants of the study had consensus on the future course which may reduce the perceived inferiority and may give a relatively fairer confidence to the community.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study explored the level and quality of acculturative stress among the displaced Kashmiri migrant Pundits who returned to the valley in 2010 afterwards as part of the government's efforts to rehabilitate and resettle the community in their homeland. The return followed the pattern of transit colonies which from last 9 years or so has not been so successful in rehabilitation of the community. The community has experienced a lot of acculturative stress. The acculturative stress is experienced by all the return refugees or immigrants, (Choudhry, 2001; Berry and Anis, 1974). Therefore, the studies do support the assertion that the acculturative stress is inevitable among all migrants.

Perceived discrimination among the displaced Kashmiri migrants is the result of persistent conflict and the mishandling of the Kashmir conflict as can be seen from the very fact that issues seem to very complicated as the community wants to have permanent colonies whereas the majority community is apprehensive of the transit colonies as a probable design to marginalize the majority status of the Muslim majority population given the disputed nature of the Kashmir issue. Perceived discrimination is evident in acculturation process of the participants. These findings are supported by the researches of (Finch, Kolody, and Vega, 2000; Williams, Spencer, & Jackson, 1999).

Similarly, the social isolation among the displaced migrant population which the participants expressed is also supported by the researches of Arthur, (1998) and Bratter and Eschback, (2005).

The second emerged theme i-e humiliation is also closely intertwined with the migrant population's mental health in general and the experience of acculturative stress in particular, Bratter and Eschback (2005). The constant experience of humiliation and perceived inferiority has a long-standing impact on the general health and psychological wellbeing of the sufferers. This assertion is also supported by (Williams & Berry, 1991).

## **CONCLUSION**

The displaced Kashmiri migrant Pundits are in severe psychological disadvantage of being in transit colonies. They experience acculturative stress, perceived discrimination, and social isolation, tend to have the feelings of humiliation and perceived inferiority as has been the findings of the present exploratory study. The intervention should focus on both the politico-cultural and more importantly psychological in nature. On the basis of the findings of the present study it is evident that the governmental effort to rehabilitate the community has proved fruitful in certain contexts yet a more focused approach to the address of the problems faced by the community of political, social and psychological nature is inevitable so as to rebuild the confidence in the community and win their trust. While this process is on, the majority community should come forward to have meaningful interactions with the displaced community and thus to motivate them to have complete resettlement to their native places. A wider debate is required to facilitate the rehabilitation of the community.

While devising the plans and policies for the displaced community, a sensitive approach is required to bridge the prevalent gap between the communities which has been there as a result of government policies and the historical underpinnings of the conflict and its handling. A robust approach is required to rebuild confidence in the community in order to ward off their acculturative stress and other psychosocial and sociocultural issues in order to reengineer the age-old social fabric of Kashmir.



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### **Conflict of Interest**

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