

## Interview-I

### **An Interview with Ved Bhasin on Forced Migration in Jammu and Kashmir\***

The history of mixed and massive flows on migration in Jammu and Kashmir dates back to complex history of protracted conflict, cross-border migration flows, development induced displacement and natural disasters. South Asian experiences of migration history have often ignored the concerns of statelessness and marginalization of some of the communities living in Kashmir for more than sixty years. In this interview, noted journalist and founder of *Kashmir Times*, Ved Bhasin sheds light on some of the forgotten migrant experiences of people who migrated from and into Jammu and Kashmir.

*Ved Bhasin*, the Chief Editor of *Kashmir Times* is a well know human rights and peace activist and has been an active participant in local, regional, and international dialogues and various other forums on Kashmir. He was the President of the Jammu & Kashmir Students Union from 1945 to 1949, the President of the J&K Youth National Conference from 1950 to 1953, member of the National Conference General Council from 1949 to 1953. Ved Bhasin is an accomplished journalist and editor. He has been the President of the J&K Association of Journalists. He has been the editor of *Naya Samaj* (1952-1954), *Daily Sandesh* (1956 to 1958), *Kashmir Post* (1958 to 1963), and a number of other journals. Bhasin was a participant in the “Dialogue on Kashmir” in Washington, D.C. sponsored by the United States Institute of Peace in 1994.

This interview was taken by Ishita Dey and Sucharita Sengupta†. They thank Pakistan-India Peoples’ Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD) West Bengal Chapter for facilitating this interview with Ved Bhasin. Ved Bhasin was in Kolkata on 20 August 2010 to deliver the second Pranab Ghosh Memorial Lecture on “Jammu and Kashmir: Memories of Partition, 1947” Please find below excerpts of the interview with Ved Bhasin on 21 August 2010.

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***Do you think the events that unfolded between 15 August 1947 and 26 August 1947; are crucial to understand the current situation with reference to the migrant and refugee populations in Jammu and Kashmir? What are the significant phases of migration flows in Jammu & Kashmir post 1947?***

V.B.: It was particularly after 1947, a large number of people migrated from one part of the divided Kashmir to the other. Immediately after partition, communal riots took place in Jammu and other side also. Hindus and Sikhs crossed over from that side to this side. Most of them were from the following areas; Muzaffarbad, Poonch, Mirpur, Kothi. Similarly, a large number of muslims fled to Pakistan side. People were pushed across from Kashmir valley because they were not supporting Sheikh Abdullah, Secretary of National Conference that time. They also fled on their own because they felt that they could be victimized because they were associated with the *musalmans*. Large number of them went across to the other side.

After this, the ceasefire was announced in 1948. Large number of families was divided particularly in Jammu region; in Poonch and Rajouri districts. There are cases where families have been clandestinely coming, meeting each other and even there have been marriages across the border. Nevertheless they were separated; they could not meet. After LOC was drawn, they could not even travel because Pakistani troops were on that side and Indian troops were on this side.

Subsequently, another migration took place in Jammu and Kashmir, in 1965. In 1965, Pakistanis entered some areas of Rajouri and Poonch; particularly in Jammu region and there were atrocities by the Indian security forces. They were forced to go. They were considered to be suspects by Indian security force. They fled to Azad Kashmir and their number is very substantive.

***Do you feel that in studies on partition; we always talk about experiences from East Pakistan, Punjab and as far as Kashmir is concerned, it is always treated as a post '65 and '70 development, so is there an absence of history in that sense?***

V.B.: Yes, there is absence of history. Like for instance, the case of the migration of the Kashmiri pandits. It is very unfortunate that they were displaced. Though, my own point of view is it is Mr. Jagmohan who engineered their migration. Various reasons were sighted to explain their migration, firstly, the communal tension in Kashmir, secondly, they were soft targets of the militants and thirdly, there could be local pressure. But as compared to them nothing was done for the displaced people who came from Azad Kashmir side to Jammu and Kashmir; the non Kashmiri Hindus and Sikhs. As far as others are concerned, for instance, the Muslims, not only went across but also large number of Muslims from some areas, Hindu

majority areas migrated to Muslim majority areas, and that kind of migration has never been dealt with. These internal migrations from one part to the other has never been reckoned or addressed.

***Has there been migration from Jammu as well?***

V.B.: There has been migration from Jammu as well. For instance after 90s, in Doda district from Jammu there are non- Kashmiris; Hindus and large number of Hindus shifted to Jammu and other several places. Most of them have gone back also and nobody bothered about them.

In Rajauri and Poonch particularly the border areas, areas where infiltration was taking place, people became victims of both the militants and security forces. Militants would cross over; they will force the people to allow them to stay with them, provide them with shelter and food. Next day they would leave and after that security forces would harass them and nobody is bothered about them.

In 1965, there were some areas, particularly the Chhamb area of Jammu which became part of Pakistan, and from this border belt, people migrated. People were forced to come out as they became victims of cross firing.

***Have the migrants been rendered citizenship status?***

V.B.: They were granted Indian citizenship, however one exception does exist. In Jammu; pre 1947, several people crossed over to Jammu from Pakistan, large number of them especially from Sialkote and adjoining areas. Large number of people was sent from Pathankote to different parts of India (in Meerut etc). There were few families, mostly rural people who crossed over and settled in border areas of Jammu like R.S. Pora; but they continue to be stateless. That time, their number was 60,000 to 70,000 but now their number has gone up to 2 lakhs.

***What is the status of the refugees from PoK?***

V.B.: Nothing much was done. Some relief was provided. They were put in army camps. There was no medical aid. They were not looked after. The camps were in areas outside of Jammu city. Subsequently, some of them were allotted Rs 12000 each as rehabilitation grant. Very little was done for them. Ultimately, they rehabilitated on their own. They managed to educate themselves and get jobs. As far as agricultural families were concerned, some lands (evacuated lands) was allotted to them but it took years and even now they have not got full proprietorship rights as certain laws like evacuee's property act acts as a hindrance. 63 years after they were displaced nothing is being done for them as compared to Kashmiri Pandits. Their situation is far better off. Families of Kashmiri Pandits are well settled in different places across India. They have been looked after by various State Governments through various reservation policies specially governments of Maharashtra,

Gujarat and Delhi have reserved special seats for students from Kashmiri Pandit families in educational institutions like Engineering and Medical Colleges. The general feeling is that they are the most pampered migrants. The only poor are people from rural areas. The leaders have vested interest because their families are either abroad and they would not encourage the poorer people in the camps to go back. Still we say that it is a sad thing that Kashmiri Pandits should not have migrated.

***Are there any camps in Jammu?***

V.B.: There are two to three camps in Jammu region. Still, their condition is bad. Still they don't have sources of income and have to depend on doles by the state. If you want to rehabilitate people, people should be put back in original places.

***Has Jammu and Kashmir Government come up with separate resettlement and rehabilitation policies for the PoK refugees and or the migrants?***

V.B.: There are no clear cut policies; decisions are taken on an ad hoc basis.

***Do you think that one of the reasons behind this ad-hoc policy is because India is a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention?***

V.B.: Yes, to a large extent. For instance, what happened to the people who went across? They were given property rights there. There are a large number of evacuee houses and people who have been staying in these properties are staying as tenants. Under this present arrangement the evacuees are owners of the properties. One of the alternatives that could be drawn up is that this property should be given to the people who are staying there and owners should be provided with alternative housing as and when they return.

***What is the political status of refugees who migrated from PoK?***

V.B.: They are not permanent residents of the state so they cannot get permanent jobs. Some of them have managed jobs. Large number of businessmen from West Punjab has been able to secure citizenship rights through false documents, by paying bribes to officers but as far as the poorer people are concerned they have not managed to secure citizenship rights. People should be given civic rights.

***Do you feel there is a difference in representation of migration related issues in Kashmir in mainstream media and local Kashmiri papers? We hardly hear about the PoK refugees in mainstream media. What is your opinion on this?***

V.B.: I have been saying this for some time now. Those refugees have no voice. They had organized some agitations. Some of them were arrested also. Nothing much has been done.

There is another section whose condition is even worse i.e., people who migrated from border areas. They have migrated number of times. Whenever there is some trouble they migrate from the entire border region; Chhamb-Jaurian, Rajouri, Poonch to safer places. Sometimes they go back and then again they are forced to migrate. There is another section; for instance they have done double fencing along the LOC. Between the two fences; large tracts of land have been occupied by the people who have been driven out. This is peculiar to Kashmir; they are in no man's land. People in Chhamb- Jaurian areas have been displaced in 1965, 1971 and now because of exchange of firing.

***We talk about Right to return in conflict situations. As far as Kashmir is concerned, do you think Kashmiri Pandits and PoK refugees enjoy the right to return?***

V.B.: Right to return is one thing while will to return is another thing. Some of them are well settled. Migration has been otherwise taking place. For instance, a large number of Kashmiri Pandits have migrated much before 1990s also. If you go and see the reports of 1986 there were one or two cases of stone pelting at temples, though they were represented in exaggerated manner. That time G.M. Shah was the Chief Minister; son – in – law of Sheikh Abdullah and some isolated incidents took place. And then the Kashmiri Pandits raised the hue and cry, but if you see the reports of those days, they claim that 75% of the Kashmiri Pandits have already migrated. But this is not the fact, only some of them did migrate. We have the records, the figure of the total number of the Kashmiri Pandits. Total Hindu population of Jammu and Kashmir; according to the 1981 census was 1.24 lakhs. Among them, there were some Rajputs; then Punjabis also. In fact, apart from Kashmiri Pandits, business and services were dominated by Punjabi Hindus and Muslims.

***Do you think the people; particularly the migrants are paying the brunt of absence of plebiscite?***

V.B.: Government of India was not interested. Their assessment was that people would not have voted for India. There were some premises that were set down for the plebiscite because Pakistan was still occupying some areas. But Government of India could have done a lot of things; for instance elections were held for the constituent assembly in 1951. If those elections has not been rigged; then that assembly would have represented the will of people of at least Indian side of Kashmir and that assembly could have been allowed to decide about it. But that was not done. All these elections were rigged. All these seventy five members were from the National Conference.

Then, after that, that assembly also became irrelevant because Sheikh Abdullah was arrested and other people were arrested.

***Do you think Indian Government is more concerned about territoriality and nationhood rather than humanitarian concerns?***

V.B.: Yes. Everything is justified in the name of national security and national interest. Whatever is done is in the name of the national interest. The syndrome of national interest, nationality, and nationalism creates our problems. All draconian laws are justified on those grounds. Oppression is justified on those grounds. Arrest of people is justified on those grounds.

***What is the current stand of Indian government as far as PoK is concerned?***

V.B.: Indian Government otherwise claims that this is part of Jammu and Kashmir state. They talk in contradictory terms.

***..But why didn't they compensate people from Mirpur whose properties were submerged due to the construction of Mangla Dam?***

V.B.: They are not bothered about them. They are not prepared to rehabilitate them. And when they talk of utilization of river water they don't take Azad Kashmir into account. Azad Kashmir people have same rights over water as our side of Kashmir. They don't take that into account. Neelum valley projects and other projects do not benefit Azad Kashmir people.

***As far as POK is concerned, do you think there is some kind of ad-hocism by the Indian Government?***

V.B.: Is it enough for the Indian Government to say that it is an integral part of India? 95% of the divided families are in Jammu region where roads have not been opened. They do not allow the citizens to cross over to this side. They have to get some permits which is a long process. It takes six months to get their permission. Our demand is to allow free movement of people based on permits issued by the District authorities.