

Sociology & Cultural Research Review (SCRR)Available Online: <https://scrrjournal.com>Print ISSN: [3007-3103](#) Online ISSN: [3007-3111](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**RE-GENERATING ROOTS: CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ADAPTATION
AMONG POST 1989 KASHMIRI MIGRANTS****Syeda Rabia Bukhari**

Lecturer Hazara University Mansehra

rabiabukhari@hu.edu.pk**Maria Younas**

Lecturer NUML University Islamabad

maria.younas@numl.edu.pk**Aqsa Rasheed**

M.Phil scholar Dept of IR Iqra university Islamabad

aqsa12swati@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Following the unrest and contested elections of 1989, large numbers of Kashmiri civilians crossed the Line of Control, seeking refuge in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) amid widespread violence and instability in the Kashmir Valley. This research explores the lived experiences of these post-1989 Kashmiri refugees, focusing on their adaptation, cultural identity, and community reconstruction in exile. Drawing on qualitative interviews, archival data, and field observations in AJK refugee settlements, the study highlights the complex processes of cultural preservation and transformation, the role of memory and nostalgia in sustaining a sense of belonging, and the intergenerational negotiations of identity that emerge among displaced communities. The paper examines how refugees navigate socioeconomic challenges, including housing, livelihoods, and education, while negotiating their political aspirations and future prospects of return. Special attention is given to the gendered dimensions of refugee life, revealing how women have contributed to cultural continuity and adapted to changing family dynamics. By documenting the resilience, struggles, and evolving identities of these Kashmiri refugee communities, the research contributes to a broader understanding of conflict-induced displacement, diaspora formation, and refugee integration in contested geopolitical settings.

Keywords: Forced Migration, Displacement, Kashmir Conflict, Refugee Resettlement, Cultural Resilience, Exile Communities, Memory And Belonging, Cultural Identity, Identity Reconstruction.

Introduction

The socio-political, economic, and cultural effects of the phenomenon of forced migration caused by conflict are long-lasting, especially in areas where territorial conflicts and historical hostilities are widespread. The Kashmir region is one such highly contested and volatile region in which the outbreak of wide-scale insurgency and state persecution after the controversial elections of the year 1989 resulted in an unprecedented population ouster. Tens of thousands of Kashmiris entered the Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) across the Line of Control (LoC) in search of refuge against the violence and human rights claims that followed in the Indian-controlled Kashmir valley. The post 1989 refugees present a distinct situation in South Asian displacement patterns: they are not only the victims of suffering and

uncertainty due to territorial controversies, but they are also the victims of the persistence of struggle of identity, home, and political recognition in the face of forced exile (Dr. Faizur Rehman, 2016).

This study explores the life and experience of these Kashmiri refugees in AJK, following the lines of their cultural identity, channel of adaptation, and their intergenerational story that displacement had formed. The paper is based on ethnographic interviews, archival documentation, and field notes made in different refugee settlements to further understand how communities of refugees develop a sense of belonging and continuity within an unknown sociopolitical landscape through a multidisciplinary prism to mesh anthropology, political science, and sociology. The Kashmiri migrants in AJK have become a remarkable case of duality: in the process of adaptation to the host environment they have tried to preserve and pass their indigenous cultural practices, language, and memoirs of the pre-displacement life.

The year 1989 turned out to be a major break in the sociopolitical landscape of Jammu and Kashmir. The Indian state through electoral malpractice and suppression of democratic dissent resulted into a complete insurgency in the Valley. It was followed up by a militarized crackdown which led to a series of extensive human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings, mass arrests and enforced disappearance. It was in this volatile backdrop that thousands of Kashmiri Muslims crossed the LoC and took refuge in what they deemed as a friendly sociopolitical environment Azad Jammu and Kashmir, under the control of Pakistan. Their movement however failed to bring them the feeling of security and stability they desired permanently. Instead it brought about a permanent state of exile, during which they were forced to grapple with new social realities, political constraints and cultural adjustment (India: Summary of human rights concerns in Jammu and Kashmir 1995).

The refugee adaptation process is not only important in gaining a sense of the short-term effects of displacement, but it is also relevant in valuing the long-term effects of exile defining a culture memory, identity and community organization. In the example of the Kashmiri refugees, adaptation has not been entailed with only coping with material deprivation or finding a job. It has triggered an adjustment of cultural life, religious faith, gender relations, and status hierarchies in a new geopolitical context. Of special interest is how collective memory and nostalgia towards the homeland acts as a source of strength and resilience which enables the refugee communities to have a symbolic connection to the place of origin. In that regard, memory itself becomes a cultural asset of identity maintenance and reproduction, although the material foundation of such identity homeland, territory, and sovereign belonging are inaccessible (Samia Hanif, 2018).

The core idea of this research is that of cultural hybridity the process under which the refugee populations mix the remnants of their initial cultural identification with the sociocultural dynamics of the host society. Although a large number of Kashmiri refugees in AJK endeavor to copy the traditions, norms, and rituals they used in the Valley, these types of culture are bound to change due to the dynamics of exile and exposure to hosts. This hybridization is neither isomorphic nor one way, but it differs in terms of age, gender, class, and level of education. The younger generations who are born in exile and who live in AJK between the memory of Kashmir that they inherited and the reality of AJK, can negotiate their sense of identity and even develop a sense of tension with their parents. Such

intergenerational relationships are an essential part of a refugee experience, showing how displacement is not only a spatial dislocation but a temporal, and even psychological one that transpires over decades (Sunpreet Kour Sodhi, 2023).

A gendered experience of displacement is one of the most outstanding characteristics of refugee life. The role of women in the Kashmiri context has been a core but under explored issue leading to cultural continuity and construction of exile community life. Women are cultural memory carriers in the sense that they often take care of linguistic traditions and religious customs as well as domestic rituals. Nevertheless, they have also increased their roles following displacement. Most women have also taken up new roles such as engaging in economic activities, decision-making, and advocacy at the local level. The change has transformed the classical gender relations leading to emergence of new family forms and power, which is both resilient and adaptive. Through the real experiences of women living in refugee camps and settlements, this study will add to a better appreciation of the workings of the interplay of gender, displacement, and cultural identity (Uzair Amjad, 2023).

The material and structural problems that set the context of the daily life of refugees are also significant. The problems of housing, access to education, healthcare, employment, and legal documentation are still the areas of concern. Large numbers of refugees live in camps or settlements that were set up during the early 1990s, and still face infrastructural shortage, overcrowding, and few economic activities. Even though there are those who have been integrated with the host society to a given extent, there are those who have not yet been integrated and thus rely on state support or informal networks. Such socioeconomic hardships are however, usually offset by high communal cohesion and religious organizations which offer spiritual as well as material sustenance. The interaction between deprivation and resilience brings a complicated layer to the adaptation of refugees and this is the way in which the survival strategies are rooted in the individual power as well as the collective power (Khalid Rahman, 2006).

The research also addresses more general theoretical questions of diaspora formation, transnational identity and politics of memory in examining how Kashmiri refugees adapt to the culture in AJK. Refugees who are fleeing political persecution and are unlike economic migrants or internally displaced persons, still have a strong sense of want to return, which is rooted not only in their personal desire of returning but also their political ambition. The concept of returning, thus, does not only serve as physical relocation to the homeland but also as a metaphorical story that determines the identity of a community, the generational dialogue, and political advocacy. This dream is commonly expressed by Kashmiri refugees in the form of political language, school education and cultural celebrations, which emphasize the temporal nature of exile and the fact that they have a legitimate claim to Kashmir.

Overall, adaptation of the post-1989 Kashmiri refugees in the AJK is not a sequent process of assimilation, nor is it a fixed retention of cultural forms. Instead, it is a negotiated, dynamic and multi-scaled phenomenon informed by memory, politics, socioeconomic restrictions, and intergenerational changes. The strength of such communities that is represented in cultural hybridity, gendered agency and collective memory bears witness to the complicated nature of identity making and remaking in a state of displacement. Consequently, the study not only sheds light into the experiences of the Kashmiri refugees but also adds to general perceptions

of cultural survival, diaspora politics, and human agency in conflict regions (Khalid Rahman, 2006).

Thematic Analysis

Conflict-Driven Displacement

The outbreak of armed insurgency in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir in 1989 triggered an extensive wave of forced migration, as thousands of Kashmiris fled across the Line of Control (LoC) into Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) to escape intensifying violence. This displacement followed the widespread disillusionment with the political system after the disputed 1987 elections, which many Kashmiris saw as the final blow to democratic participation. The Indian state's heavy-handed response including the deployment of military forces, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings created an atmosphere of fear, especially in rural areas (Ganguly, 1996). One local elder in the Chakothi area of AJK recalled the first wave of refugees in the early 1990s: *"We saw families coming across the river at night wet, barefoot, and terrified. They had nothing but the clothes on their backs. Some carried children who hadn't eaten for days."* (resident, 2018) This testimonial reflects not just the physical hardship of crossing into AJK but also the sheer desperation that fueled such journeys.

Many local residents who witnessed the early influx of refugees noted that the decision to flee was often made overnight. A shopkeeper in the border town of Titrinote recounted, *"People crossed in silence. We gave them food, shelter, but they hardly spoke for days. They looked broken. They had left everything behind their homes, land, and family graves."* (Shopkeeper, 2018) The fear among migrants was not limited to physical violence but included the trauma of cultural and existential loss. Residents observed that many families were split, with men often coming first to assess safety. Refugees reported harrowing experiences of evading Indian patrols, hiding in forests, and trekking through rugged mountain paths for days without food. Local hosts were often the first line of humanitarian support. As one schoolteacher in Rawalakot described, *"We opened the mosque for them. The women helped with clothes and food. It became a shared struggle. Even though we were not displaced, we felt their pain."* (Schoolteacher, 2018)

The patterns of migration and community response reveal a complex dynamic of forced movement, cultural preservation, and local solidarity. While many refugees were eventually placed in camps set up by the AJK government, the initial support often came from local families and community groups who offered space, food, and emotional comfort. Some local youth groups in Kotli and Bagh districts even assisted refugees in finding lost family members and adjusting to camp life. The displacement thus did not only create refugee communities, but also transformed the identities and perceptions of local residents in AJK. As a social worker from Hattian Bala summarized, *"Their story became part of ours. We did not just witness history we lived it with them."* (worker S. , 2018) These accounts underscore the depth of community engagement and the long-lasting human connections forged in times of shared crisis.

Socioeconomic Resettlement in AJK

The socioeconomic resettlement of post-1989 Kashmiri refugees in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) has remained a complex and largely unresolved issue. Initially housed in temporary camps across areas like Muzaffarabad, Kotli, and Bagh, many refugees continue to live in overcrowded shelters with limited infrastructure. Despite decades of residence, most of these settlements lack proper sanitation,

clean water, and durable housing (Dr. Faizur Rehman, 2016). A local resident in Muzaffarabad noted, *"These camps were supposed to be temporary, but thirty years have passed, and nothing has changed for them."* (camp, 2018)" Refugees, unable to acquire property or build permanent homes, remain stuck in uncertain living conditions, often reliant on state assistance and unable to fully integrate into host communities.

Employment has also been a persistent challenge for refugee families. Barred from formal land ownership and faced with local economic limitations, many rely on daily wage labor or petty trade. Some younger refugees have pursued education, but financial hardship and limited access to quality institutions have made long-term advancement difficult. A schoolteacher in Rawalakot shared, *"Many children want to study, but their families need them to work. They have to choose survival over school."* (Schoolteacher, 2018)" Without stable income sources or access to government jobs, the path to self-sufficiency remains narrow, leading to cycles of poverty that are hard to break within camp settings.

While aid from the government and NGOs has provided essential support over the years, it has also fostered dependency. Monthly stipends and food rations have offered short-term relief but not long-term empowerment. A local NGO worker in Kotli remarked, *"These people need more than rations they need opportunities."* (worker N. , 2018)" Although a few have started small businesses or migrated for work, most remain economically vulnerable. The lack of inclusive policies to promote skills training or legal empowerment continues to prevent refugees from becoming self-reliant, underscoring the need for sustainable resettlement strategies that go beyond temporary aid.

Cultural Identity and Homeland Memory

For post-1989 Kashmiri refugees living in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), cultural identity has served as both a source of resilience and a challenge in exile. Displacement has not erased their cultural practices, but it has reshaped them in new and complex ways. While traditional customs, language, dress, and religious rituals continue to be observed within refugee communities, these practices have also undergone subtle transformations. Elders remain deeply committed to maintaining Kashmiri identity, often taking on the role of cultural transmitters (kazmi). A refugee elder in a camp near Bagh stated, *"We teach our children our language and our way of life, even if they've never seen our village."* (elder, 2018)" However, younger generations raised in exile often show signs of hybrid cultural identities blending Kashmiri traditions with local AJK influences, reflecting the gradual shifts caused by prolonged displacement.

The preservation of homeland memory is a powerful force in the daily lives of displaced Kashmiris. Refugee families regularly recount stories of their ancestral villages, traditional celebrations, and communal harmony in pre-1989 Kashmir. These memories are not only shared through oral storytelling but also through food, religious practices, and seasonal customs. A middle-aged woman in a Muzaffarabad camp shared, *"Every spring, I prepare the dishes my mother made in Baramulla. It makes me feel like I am still connected to her and to my home."* (woman M.-a. , 2018)" Such acts of remembrance serve as emotional anchors, reinforcing a collective identity rooted in place and history. They also offer psychological comfort amid the uncertainty and marginalization of exile.

Nostalgia has become a vital coping mechanism for many refugees who struggle with the pain of lost homes, fractured families, and long-term uncertainty.

Reimagining and reconstructing the past allows them to preserve dignity and resist cultural erasure. Though the longing for return is often unfulfilled, it remains central to the refugee narrative. As one youth born in a refugee settlement put it, *"I've never been to Srinagar, but I feel I belong there. My parents made sure we never forgot where we came from."* (settlement, 2018)" This intergenerational transmission of memory sustains a symbolic connection to the homeland and reinforces a shared sense of purpose and identity in exile.

Community Networks and Institutional Support

The resettlement and survival of post-1989 Kashmiri refugees in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) have been significantly influenced by the role of local institutions, community networks, and non-governmental organizations. While the AJK government provided initial support through land allocation for camps, monthly stipends, and ration distribution, long-term rehabilitation efforts have often been limited by resource constraints and lack of comprehensive policy planning. NGOs have stepped in to fill some of these gaps by offering healthcare, education, psychosocial support, and vocational training (Bhat, 2012). A representative of a local aid organization in Muzaffarabad stated, *"Government aid may be the foundation, but we are the ones building on it training teachers, supporting orphans, and creating hope."* (representative, 2018)" However, despite these efforts, support often remains uneven and dependent on project-based funding, making sustained progress difficult for many refugee families.

In the absence of strong institutional frameworks, social and communal networks within refugee communities have emerged as crucial mechanisms for survival and stability. These networks, built on kinship, shared origin, and mutual support, help refugees navigate daily challenges such as housing shortages, job referrals, and medical emergencies. Families pool resources to educate children, arrange marriages, and provide care for widows and orphans. A refugee youth in a Kotli settlement shared, *"If someone falls ill or loses work, neighbors step in. We look after each other because no one else will."* (youth, 2018)" Such solidarity reinforces a sense of belonging and collective strength, helping communities cope with the emotional and material difficulties of displacement.

In addition to this, the religious organizations especially the local mosques and madrassas are crucial in the social cohesion. They not only offer spiritual guidance but also social provisions such as provision of food, settling disputes and informal education. Being financed by local benefactors, these institutions provide safe communal grounds where refugees can meet, exchange their concerns and maintain their cultural and religious practices. The interrelationship between institutional and informal support mechanisms shows that although interventions by the state and the NGOs are needed, strength of the internal communal ties best serves to maintain life of the refugees in exile.

Gendered Dimensions of Refugee Life

With displacement of Kashmiri families after 1989 there came significant changes in gender roles and family structures of refugee communities in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Women as traditional homemakers were thrown into the role of maintaining life in the household in a situation of want, doubt, and loss. In most incidences, women were forced to take up leadership positions because the male members of the family were separated during the migration, detained or killed (Bhat, 2012). One widow in a Muzaffarabad refugee camp said, when her husband died, she had to bring up five children by herself. I came to know how to handle

money, negotiate with authorities and make choices. I did not see this before. These changes have transformed the traditional patriarchal systems leaving a room to allow women to engage more in the life of their families and communities, although they are struggling with the burden of overwhelming responsibilities.

Concurrently, displacement has also put women under gender-specific risks. Most are exposed to heightened risk of domestic violence, forced or early marriages and unable to receive healthcare or reproductive services. Women and girls in crowded camps where privacy is hard to come by usually deal with the issue of safety and dignity. One young woman in a Kotli settlement, complained: there is no privacy in the tents. Girls fear to talk, to move freely. Education is something that we all dream about. (woman Y. , 2018)" Nonetheless, the refugee women have been extremely resilient. They have set up informal education groups, shared child-care duties and formed support groups to widows and single mothers providing both material and emotional support.

Women still experience exile according to the religious and cultural expectations, but the exile situation has also enabled new types of agency. Some women have acquired a sense of independence that they did not have before through vocational training programs, small-scale income generating ventures and community-based programs. According to one teacher who is a refugee, displacement deprived us of the homes but provided many women with a voice. We are not yet through, but we are more powerful (teacher, 2018).

Conclusion

The humanitarian and socio-political crisis of Kashmiri civilian's displacement to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) after 1989 is a multidimensional phenomenon, which is rooted deep in the protracted conflict. The forced migration was not only reaction to the direct physical violence but also to the general feeling of political powerlessness and cultural oppression as well as to the existential threat. The patterns and reasons of cross-border migration were the comprised interrelation of fear, urgency, and survival, caused by the breakdown of civil order and the general militarization of the Valley. Such refugees have crossed the Line of Control not only as the last chance but as a deliberate act to save the identity, dignity and life in response to state violence and uncertainty.

After resettling in AJK, the refugees faced fierce socioeconomic issues. They have been limited in resettlement in the long run due to insufficient housing conditions and job opportunities as well as access to quality education. Congestion in the camps, legal restrictions as well as underdeveloped integration policies have left a large number of refugees in a long-term phase of marginalization. Although the government aid and that of the NGOs has been very necessary, it has also over time created a culture of dependency in some quarters. However, initiatives of self-reliance have been evident in informal work, community based learning and small-scale entrepreneurship, showing how resilient refugee communities have been to breaking the structural limitations.

Regardless of the long-lasting exile, Kashmiri refugees have been very resilient in maintaining their cultural identity. They still strengthen the connection and a sense of belonging to their homeland through memory, storytelling, food, and traditional practices. This cultural continuity is, however, accompanied by certain changes in a subtle way, in particular, younger generations born in exile. Nostalgia and memory are now both effective coping mechanisms, maintaining emotional stability, and boosting group identity, in exile. At the same time, local community

networks and religious institutions have proven to be crucial in keeping things intact providing support where formal institutions are weak. There has been a considerable, but skewed, role of NGOs and local bodies in the areas of healthcare, education, and psychosocial services.

Notably, the gendered aspects of displacement point to vulnerability as well as strength. Women who were once in the traditional roles have become the focal point in family sustenance and community reconstruction. Despite all the challenges, which range between insecurity in their countries and lack of resources, most of them have taken the lead in terms of education, generating income, and taking care of their families. On the whole, the experiences of post 1989 Kashmiri refugees in AJK bespeak an active process of adaptation, survival and identity building. They did not only suffer the consequences of being displaced and alienated, but they also experienced the power of resilience, cultural survival, and the dream of returning and self-recognition.

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