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**We will all be nomads now**

The writer is an ex editor of BBC and penguin author of 'Lost in terror'.

More than one million nomads of Jammu and Kashmir, mostly from the Gujjar and Bakkarwal communities, who prefer to live in temporary sheds or mud houses in the forests and mountains, are facing forcible evictions from the government. The action has outraged all political and social circles across the region.

Contrary to Kashmiri Muslims, the nomads of Jammu and Kashmir are widely believed to be convicted Indians who have never played any significant role in the freedom movement. After the partition of India and Pakistan, the majority of Muslims started a movement against the 'accession to India' by the then maharaja that left two countries with the volatile legacy of fighting wars, proxies and animosities unabated.

Public and political circles have expressed deep concern over the live coverage of the recent demolition and eviction of the nomads’ temporary homes on media channels. "It has become a pattern of [the] BJP to intimidate first and then make it into [a] viral video to instil fear among Muslims", says Jamal Khan who had received an eviction notice recently.

Some nomadic tribes have been accused of helping young people cross the border into Pakistan during the armed movement in the past. Yet, mainstream politicians have always considered them a safe vote bank and have never questioned their loyalty.

Not a single political party thriving on this vote bank has ever thought seriously about the welfare, education and housing of these tribes roaming in the mountains, deserts and jungles. As per recent surveys, 95 percent of their population is illiterate, jobless and homeless.

They are a very hard working and religious people, and strict followers of their traditions. Wherever they go, they leave behind mud huts, quench their thirst with waterfalls, give birth in the open fields and eat organic food – which is the secret of their health.

I got a chance a decade ago to stay with a few nomad families and walked for three months with them. My documentary series 'Ghumaantu' on the nomads for the BBC looked deep into their unique lifestyle, customs and hardships.

Under the Forest Act of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, gypsies were entitled to temporary residence in forests and mountains. They had rights to raise their livestock and subsist on local farming. Because of the inclement weather in Kashmir, they prefer to stay in the forests of the valley for about six months of summer and return to the hilly areas of Jammu for the remaining six months.

After the transfer of the state to the Union Territory on August 5 last year, when J&K was robbed of its constitution, identity and special status, more than 100 central laws were applied to Jammu and Kashmir – except the Forest Act 2006 which would have allowed the gypsies to regain all these rights of grazing, farming and dwelling. Most of them have expressed fear that Hindutva policies were adopted to evict them from mud huts under the guise of saving the forests, and are expecting an amended forest act.

Harassing, evicting and banning temporary accommodation in the jungles after the rape and death of a seven-year-old nomad girl in the Rasana village of Kathua is seen as the beginning of a series of systematic policies by Hindu groups in Jammu. The forcible eviction process started soon after the heinous Rasana crime and before J&K was stripped of its special status.

Javed Rahi, an expert on tribal affairs, says: "The issue actually escalated when some environmental activists in Jammu petitioned the court that many Gujjars and Bakkerwals have taken over the forest land and they need to be evicted. It is important to note that the court issued an order to evict them out of the forests and pastures. Many families have received eviction notices and many already evicted. We have filed a petition in this regard in which we have requested to give rights to the gypsies under the Central Forest Act.”

Muslims in Jammu feel terrified and have not forgotten the bloodshed of the 1940s during the partition of the Subcontinent when, according to some think tank reports, the Jansangh and the Maharaja's Dogra army killed three to five lakh Muslims and hundreds of thousands were forced to leave home and cross the border. A senior journalist from Jammu says that "such conditions are being deliberately recreated that a few percent of Muslims now left in Jammu will be forced to migrate from here."

The Muslims of Jammu were somewhat relieved by the Roshni Act which was introduced by Farooq Abdullah's government in 2001, by which the ownership of government land which has been occupied by some people could be obtained against a fixed amount. The objective was to generate another source of income for the government as well. According to an estimate of the government, giving property rights of 21,000 kanals of land could have earned the government Rs25,000 crore, but evidence shows that its benefits were grabbed by influential politicians, businessmen and top officials whose list is presumed to be compiled by the present government.

A few weeks ago, the Jammu and Kashmir High Court declared the 'Roshni scheme' illegal and unconstitutional. The court ordered an inquiry by the investigating agency, CBI. Immediately after the verdict, most of the structures in the Muslim areas of Jammu and in the hilly areas of Kashmir began to be demolished. The demolition drive was condemned by mainstream leaders, who accused the BJP of plotting to evict Kashmiri Muslims from their land and dwellings.

Explaining this, the whistleblower on the Rasana rape case and human rights activist, Talib Hussain says, “The BJP in Jammu has been campaigning against Muslims for a long time under a well-organized conspiracy but they could not find any Muslim to target and make [a] viral video on social network platforms to create fear. Although, Kashmiri truck drivers or labourers are occasionally targeted if they pass by. They have now started intimidating Gujjars and Bakkarwals as a soft target. The plan was executed by spreading hatred against them, accusing them of stealing cattle and illegally occupying forest lands which has made them suspicious in the eyes of [the] Dogra community of [the] Jammu region.

“It is, in fact, linked to [the] rape of Asifa when Ekta Manch and BJP ministers marched in favor of the perpetrators of rape. When the process of snatching citizenship rights from 22 crore Muslims in India is being carried out by [the] Hindutva regime, what could be the fate of these poor communities of Gujjars?"

Obviously, Muslims belonging to every class, sect or ethnicity in Jammu and Kashmir are the target of the BJP's Hindutva policy for which work is in full swing on an integrated program to eradicate the Muslim character of the region. More than 100 mega industrial projects are said to have been approved to destroy the forests of Kashmir. Soon the day will come when Ambanis and Adanis will be feudal lords of Kashmir, while homeless Kashmiris will be seen working in their own orchards on a daily wage basis. That is the dream of Hindutva for every Muslim in J&K.