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Review of *On Uncertain Ground: Displaced Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu and Kashmir* by Ankur Datta

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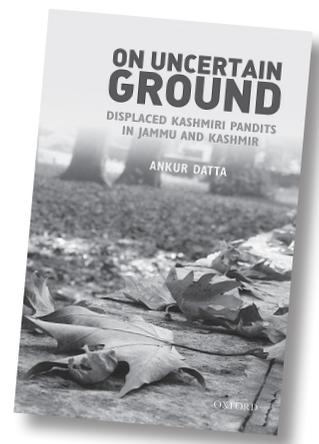
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On Uncertain Ground: Displaced Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu and Kashmir.

Ankur Datta. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017. 296 pages. ISBN 9780199466771.

Reviewed by Kyle Gardner

Of the many recent events in Kashmir's post-1947 history, perhaps none better symbolizes its violent

social upheaval than the flight of the Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir Valley in 1989–90. In the wake of a disputed state election in 1987, Kashmiri separatists built an insurgency that drew on waves of popular protest and rising Islamism. By 1989 these groups' tactics included assassinations of a number of prominent Kashmiri Pandits, an upper-caste Hindu minority that had long occupied a privileged position in Kashmiri society (the honorific title "Pandit" reflects this). After Indian forces opened fire on protesters in Srinagar on January 21, 1990, the Valley descended into a particularly intense cycle of protest and military retaliation, with the Pandits becoming increasingly associated with the occupying Indian forces. The growing sense of harassment and uncertainty convinced the majority of Pandits to leave. Within a year, perhaps as many as 120,000–140,000 Pandits had left in what became known as the "migration" or "exodus." Most of them settled in Jammu, the capital city of the eponymous Hindu-majority region of India's Jammu and Kashmir state. The resulting experience of exile, and the changing meanings of place and identity that emerged with it, forms the subject of Akur Datta's ethnography.

Datta delves into the interrelated concerns of "place-making" and "political claim-making" in the displaced Pandit community by drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2005–2007 in the resettlement camps of Jammu. He begins

with a wide-ranging review of literature on forced migration and a brief account of the history leading up to the Pandits' flight, before shifting to a discussion of the narratives his informants tell about their collective history. While it is difficult to do service to the complexity of Kashmir's history, Datta shows how the Pandits narratives quickly became refracted through the lens of migration and exile. This first section of the book also graphically illustrates the sense of confusion within the Pandit community leading up to their exodus. Despite this, the author gives little sense of the varieties of justifications for fleeing, or any detail of the actual migration. This is a peculiar omission given that this migration occurred in the span of a single year for over one hundred thousand individuals.

In the central portion of the book the author zooms in on Jammu and the primary "place of exception": the state-sponsored camps established for the Pandits. Like many communities associated with diaspora, the displaced Pandits "see their lives shaped by migration" (p. 128). Yet by the time of the author's fieldwork these communities had also become settled into the ordinary rhythms of everyday life. Through a range of extensive interviews Datta explores this paradoxical experience of normalcy and exception. He also identifies some of the dramatic social changes taking place within these settlements. Pandits whose social status was often associated with middle- or

upper-class professions were being forced by economic necessity to do manual work (*mazdūri*). Many had also left spacious homes in the Kashmir Valley for the cramped one-room tenements (ORTs) of the camps. Above all, Datta argues, the trauma of displacement for the Pandits was "related to reconciling the loss of prior status with the discontent of the present" (p. 22).

In the final chapters, Datta explores the political claim-making of the Pandits in Jammu. In what are perhaps the most fascinating sections of the book, the author explores the politics of victimhood and the desire of the Pandits to "claim the status of victims of violence" as a direct result of their support for the Indian state (p. 35). The comparisons Datta's informants make to the Holocaust and the Jewish experience of genocide are particularly intriguing (pp. 82, 177–178, 228). While the number of Pandits who were actually killed in the violence of 1989–90 falls in the low hundreds, the branding of two key events leading to the Pandit exodus as a "Holocaust Day" and "Martyrs' Day" reflects a desire by the group to be seen as victims of a kind of genocide. This claim often accompanied assertions that Kashmiri Pandits are "*asli*" (true) Indians (p. 175). The Pandits inability to live in their homeland thus becomes symbolic of India's inability to integrate Kashmir. Datta concludes by exploring how the displaced Pandits' interactions with the "relief and rehabilitation regime" of the

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Indian state requires them to maintain their official status as migrants, albeit ones still within the borders of their home state (p. 36).

While the author's analysis of the political claim-making of the Pandits in Jammu reveals the degree to which simultaneous claims of uniqueness and analogy to other victimized groups work together in establishing exile narratives, his exploration of migrant place-making is less satisfying. Despite an extensive review of the literature on forced migration, internal displacement, and place-making, the author's own position remains hesitant, and at times unclear. It is certainly no surprise that experiences of place and migration are mutually produced (p. 127). But given the ubiquity of displaced peoples across the globe, what is particular to the place-making associated with the Pandit experience and what does it contribute to the existing literature on the Kashmiri Pandits? The author himself seems to grapple with these questions throughout the book. As if to underscore the ubiquity of displacement (and the study of it), even the author's own informants tell him that they have already grown accustomed to being objects of research (e.g. pp. 82, 219–220).

Displacement and migration suffuses the history of modern South Asia. Partition brought about the largest population transfer in human history. And numerous examples of political, ethnic, or religious exiles can easily be found throughout the region. The flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959,

for instance, triggered a massive exodus from Tibet, with perhaps one hundred thousand Tibetans establishing permanent settlements in India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Besides offering a case study, each of these migrations adds data to patterns of movement and place-making. The fact that the Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu remain within the same state from which they fled also attests to a new kind of communal partitioning in South Asia—one revealed in ongoing calls for the reorganization (and creation) of states or union territories across India. The parallels of loss of status, nostalgia for a historical home, and a sense of being “in between” are common to many diverse South Asian populations, whether Muhajirs in Sindh, Tibetans in Dharamsala, or Bengalis Hindus who migrated from Eastern to Western Bengal. Given that displacement necessarily raises questions about identity within a given state, Datta's work might have benefited from a fuller engagement with the numerous comparative examples that he occasionally mentions in passing, but rarely uses to sharpen his own argument. A deeper diachronic engagement with identity and place-making would have helped to do this as well, by engaging, for example, the extensive work of Ashis Nandy on the erasure (and reconstruction) of identity under colonialism and following independence.

But what, for the purposes of this journal, does *On Uncertain Ground* tell us about the broader region and the Himalaya? The communalism reflected in the Pandits' migration

and in their contemporary politics is also present in the politics of Ladakh, the third major region of Jammu and Kashmir. Ladakhi Buddhists, like the Kashmiri Pandits, have long perceived themselves to be victims of the Muslim majority of Kashmir (and, like Datta's Pandit informants, often perceive themselves to be patriots of India). Farther afield, Bhutan's expulsion of its ethnic Lhotshampa population in the 1990s reflected the threat posed by a minority population to an ethno-nationalist state. Each of these examples draws upon particular histories and senses of place, but in aggregate reflect key concerns of identity politics. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Datta's book is in revealing how the Kashmiri Pandit experience underscores the ubiquity of modern displacement and the role of identity in that experience.

Kyle Gardner is a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Chicago. His forthcoming dissertation examines the role of geography in border-making across the northwestern Himalaya.