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Displacement to Resilience: Understanding the Forced Migration from Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex trajectories of forced migration from Jammu and Kashmir, focusing on the intertwined socio-political, economic, and emotional dimensions of displacement. It investigates how political oppression and systemic violence compelled thousands to migrate from Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), transforming migration into a struggle for survival and a quest for dignity. The research further examines how displaced communities navigate identity loss, belonging, and adaptation within new socio-cultural and institutional contexts. Conducted as a qualitative inquiry, the study involved in-depth interviews with 23 household heads residing in refugee camps across Bagh District, AJK, selected through purposive sampling. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of struggle, resilience, and reconstruction. Findings reveal that while displacement ensured physical safety, it also perpetuated economic deprivation, social exclusion, and institutional neglect. Nonetheless, cultural continuity, religious faith, and community solidarity emerged as powerful sources of resilience and psychological strength. The experiences of the displaced embody both suffering and perseverance, illustrating the human capacity to rebuild identity, restore agency, and sustain hope in the face of prolonged marginalization and loss.

Keywords: Migration, Displacement, Marginalization, Culture, Adaptation.

Introduction

Forced migration often results not simply in a change of place but in a profound rupture of social, economic and psychological foundations (Castles, 2003b). When individuals are compelled to depart their homelands under conditions of political oppression and threat of violence, the experience of displacement becomes crucible for transformation (Colson, 2003). In such contexts, Castles (2003a) argued that

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forced migration and political oppression reveals how structural violence and denial of civil-rights precipitate migration, and how this initial uprooting sets in motion a trajectory of disruption that extends into every domain of life. Simultaneously, Castles (2006) asserted that economic displacement and structural marginalization captures how displaced people often encounter economic precarity in their new environment, where exclusion from labor markets, inadequate support and discrimination undermine their capacity to rebuild livelihoods. Wood (1994) revealed that these interlinked processes of dislocation and marginalization create a critical platform for the exploration of cultural continuity and adaptation, illustrating how migrants draw upon familiar cultural practices—language, ritual, family patterns—to maintain a sense of belonging, even as they negotiate new social landscapes. At the same time, Nolin (2017) added that psychological trauma and identity struggles underscores that identity is neither fixed nor merely transplanted: it is reconstructed through the interplay of loss, adaptation and resilience, with many migrants navigating multiple, competing identities in order to cope with stigma and exclusion (Kraly, Abbasi-Shavazi, Torres Colón, & Reed, 2023).

Research on forced migrants shows that identity work is strategic, situated and relational: migrants actively deploy, adjust or shed identities in response to their shifting socio-economic and cultural contexts (Collinson, 2011; Portes, 2010). Moreover, the intersection of economic hardship and identity reconstruction has been shown to pose a particular challenge, since economic marginalization often magnifies feelings of inferiority, social invisibility and psychological distress, but can also stimulate new forms of agency and community solidarity. Against this backdrop, Chatty (2014) described that how the journey from displacement to resilience unfolds through the dynamic interplay of socioeconomic, cultural and political t reworking of identity through which displaced persons claim dignity, belonging and purpose despite structural adversity. By tracing the intersections of oppression, marginalization, cultural adaptation and psychological renewal, the study illuminates how resilience emerges not despite displacement, but because of the complex process of negotiation that displacement forces.

Study Context: This research was conducted in District Bagh, where people displaced by forced migration from Jammu and Kashmir, Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK), initially settled temporarily after their arrival. They were primarily accommodated in designated areas known as refugee camps. Over time, these camps transformed into permanent settlements, where many displaced families continue to live today. The sociocultural, political, and economic conditions of these communities reflect persistent marginalization and vulnerability. While some families—once well-off before displacement—have managed to improve their socioeconomic standing, many continue to face instability and limited opportunities. Despite the significance of their experiences, there has been no comprehensive study addressing the lives and challenges of these displaced populations. Therefore, this research seeks to explore their journeys from displacement to resilience, uncovering personal narratives that illuminate their struggles, adaptations, and enduring strength.

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Literature Review

Existing literature on forced migration and political oppression underscores that displacement is not only a physical relocation but also a deep political and structural phenomenon. Scholars such as (Collier, 2013) and Lewis, Dwyer, Hodkinson, and Waite (2015) argue that forced migration often stems from systemic oppression, authoritarian regimes, and conflict situations that deny individuals their basic rights and security. Political violence and persecution compel people to flee, while the act of displacement itself reinforces their vulnerability and exclusion within host societies. According to Lewis et al. (2015), displaced populations are frequently labeled and categorized by states in ways that reproduce dependency and marginalization, limiting their agency and access to resources. Furthermore, the literature highlights that the intersection between economic marginalization and identity reconstruction becomes critical in post-migration contexts. Castles (2003b) and Castles (2006) note that displaced individuals face restricted employment opportunities and structural discrimination, forcing them to renegotiate their social and cultural identities to survive. Yet, amidst oppression, many develop adaptive resilience by reconstructing community networks, cultural practices, and new forms of belonging (Abubakar et al., 2018). Thus, forced migration literature reveals a paradox: while political oppression and economic exclusion erode stability, they also provoke transformative identity processes that enable displaced individuals to reclaim dignity and agency within constrained environments.

Cohen and Sirkeci (2011) stated economic displacement and structural marginalization highlights how forced migration disrupts not only livelihoods but also the broader socio-economic foundations that shape identity and belonging. According to Bartram (2015), economic displacement often results from structural inequalities embedded in political and global economic systems that marginalize specific populations, forcing them into migration as a survival strategy. Studies by Jacobsen (2014) and Chatty (2014) emphasize that displaced individuals frequently encounter exclusionary labor markets, lack of access to capital, and limited recognition of skills in host societies, leading to chronic poverty and dependence. Structural marginalization, as noted by Colson (2003), operates through social hierarchies and institutional barriers that systematically restrict migrants' opportunities for social mobility. This persistent economic vulnerability compels migrants to reconstruct their identities around new forms of work, community participation, and cultural adaptation to regain a sense of agency. Scholars such as Portes (2010) argue that resilience in such contexts emerges through informal economies, collective coping strategies, and redefined social roles that challenge structural constraints. Hence, the literature suggests that economic displacement and structural marginalization are intertwined forces that not only perpetuate exclusion but also stimulate processes of identity reconstruction and resilience among displaced populations.

Collier (2013) argued that cultural continuity and adaptation in the context of displacement emphasizes that migration is not merely a loss of homeland but a process of cultural negotiation and identity reconstruction. Scholars such as Stepputat and Sørensen (2014) and McAdam (2010) argue that displaced communities continuously reconstruct cultural meanings to maintain a sense of belonging while adapting to new social and political realities. Cultural continuity functions as an

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anchor of stability, preserving traditions, languages, and rituals that connect individuals to their collective past. However, as noted by Wood (1994) and McAdam (2010), adaptation is equally essential for survival in host societies, requiring flexibility and selective incorporation of new cultural elements. This dual process of maintaining and transforming culture reflects resilience, as migrants creatively bridge old and new worlds to construct hybrid identities. Studies by Cohen and Sirkeci (2011) further reveal that transnational networks enable displaced individuals to sustain cultural practices across borders, reinforcing social cohesion and emotional security. Thus, the literature suggests that cultural continuity and adaptation are intertwined strategies of resilience, through which displaced people reassert agency, negotiate belonging, and reconstruct identity in conditions of uncertainty and marginalization.

Chatty (2014) asserted that psychological trauma and identity in the context of forced migration underscores the profound emotional and existential disruptions that accompany displacement. Scholars such as De Haas (2014) and Bartram (2015) describe how forced migration generates deep psychological wounds resulting from loss, violence, and prolonged uncertainty. The trauma of uprooting is compounded by social exclusion and economic marginalization in host societies, which erode self-worth and belonging. According to Colson (2003), identity formation is a dynamic process shaped by social recognition and continuity; displacement destabilizes this process, forcing individuals to renegotiate who they are in unfamiliar contexts. Studies by Castles (2006) and Nolin (2017) highlight that refugees often experience identity fragmentation, survivor guilt, and emotional dislocation, yet many also engage in active meaning-making and reconstruction of self through resilience, spirituality, and community support. Psychological recovery thus becomes intertwined with identity reconstruction, as displaced individuals rebuild coherence by integrating traumatic experiences into new life narratives. The literature emphasizes that resilience is not the absence of suffering but the capacity to transform trauma into adaptive strength and renewed identity, allowing displaced people to reclaim agency and belonging in the aftermath of profound loss.

Methodology

We adopted a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of displacement and resilience among individuals forcibly migrated from Jammu and Kashmir (Indian Occupied Kashmir) to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Qualitative inquiry was deemed most appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth understanding of personal narratives, emotional experiences, and social processes that quantitative methods might overlook. The study focused on capturing the lived experiences of refugees, emphasizing the subjective meanings they attach to their displacement, struggles, and coping mechanisms.

The population of the study comprised refugees residing in the Bagh refugees' camps, who had migrated from Indian Occupied Kashmir due to political conflict, militarization, and associated human rights violations. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the research questions. A total of twenty-three participants were interviewed, ensuring representation across age, gender, and socioeconomic

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backgrounds. The selection criteria prioritized individuals with first-hand experience of forced migration and long-term residence in the camps, as these perspectives were central to understanding processes of adaptation and resilience.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide that facilitated consistency while allowing participants the freedom to narrate their experiences in their own words. The interview guide included questions on pre-migration life, experiences of displacement, socioeconomic challenges, cultural adjustments, psychological impacts, and strategies for coping and resilience. Interviews were conducted in locations convenient and comfortable for the participants, ensuring a safe environment conducive to open and honest sharing. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data. This approach involved multiple readings of the transcripts, coding significant statements, and categorizing them into themes and sub-themes related to economic hardships, cultural continuity, psychological trauma, and resilience. Themes were refined iteratively to accurately reflect participants' experiences and to highlight both shared and divergent narratives.

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, assured of confidentiality, and provided informed consent prior to participation. Pseudonyms were used in reporting findings to protect identities, and care was taken to avoid any questions or discussions that could cause distress. Additionally, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences, ensuring respect for autonomy and well-being.

Key Findings

The key findings of this study reveal the complex realities of forced migration from Jammu and Kashmir to Azad Kashmir. Participants' narratives highlight the intertwined challenges of economic hardship, social exclusion, and psychological distress, alongside remarkable resilience. The following themes were identified and discussed.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 23)

Demographics	Referents	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Household Head	Men	23	100.0
	Total	23	100.0
Age (Years)	25–35	6	26.1
	36–46	7	30.4
	47–57	5	21.7
	58–68 and above	5	21.7
	Total	23	100.0
Gender	Male	10	43.5
	Female	13	56.5

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	Total	23	100.0
Marital Status	Married	21	91.3
	Unmarried	2	8.7
	Total	23	100.0
Family Size	4–6 Members	10	43.5
	7–9 Members	6	26.1
	10–12 Members	5	21.7
	13 and above	2	8.7
	Total	23	100.0
Education Before Migration	None	19	82.6
	Middle	4	17.4
	Total	23	100.0
Education After Migration	None	10	43.5
	Middle	3	13.0
	Matric	6	26.1
	Intermediate	2	8.7
	Bachelors	2	8.7
	Total	23	100.0
Occupation	Agriculture	7	30.4
	Carpenter	1	4.3
	None	15	65.2
	Total	23	100.0

The demographic profile of the respondents reveals that all household heads in the study were men, reflecting the patriarchal family structure common among displaced Kashmiri communities. In terms of age, most respondents were between 36 and 46 years (30.4%), followed by those aged 25–35 years (26.1%), while older age groups (47–57 and 58–68 years) each constituted 21.7%, indicating a mix of middle-aged and older participants with lived experiences of displacement. Gender distribution shows a slightly higher representation of women (56.5%) than men (43.5%), highlighting women's active participation in sharing migration narratives. Most respondents were married (91.3%), which aligns with the family-oriented nature of migration and settlement patterns. Family size tended to be large, with 43.5% of households comprising 4–6 members and 26.1% having 7–9 members, reflecting extended family living arrangements. Educational data show that before migration, 82.6% had no formal education, suggesting restricted access to schooling in conflict-affected areas. However, after migration, education levels improved modestly, with 56.5% attaining some form of education up to the bachelor's level, indicating gradual progress in literacy and educational access. Occupationally, 65.2% reported having no formal employment, while 30.4% engaged in agriculture and 4.3% worked as carpenters, illustrating limited livelihood options and economic marginalization among displaced

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populations.

Theme 1: Forced Migration and Political Oppression

The narratives reveal that migration from Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) primarily represented a survival strategy amid persistent political violence, military aggression, and pervasive fear. The participants' accounts are permeated with expressions of helplessness and psychological distress, highlighting how structural oppression and militarization stripped individuals and families of their sense of security and dignity. Many described how the constant threat of military raids transformed everyday life into a zone of fear and vigilance. One participant stated, "One man of the house had to stay awake all night to warn the others in case of an army attack." Such testimonies capture the normalization of violence and its intrusion into domestic and private spaces.

Violations of human and civil rights also emerged as central drivers of displacement. Respondents spoke about continuous surveillance, arbitrary detentions, and gender-based violence, with women often bearing the brunt of such atrocities. One participant recounted that "soldiers would target women from Muslim families, reflecting both individual suffering and collective humiliation experienced by the community."

Religious persecution further deepened the climate of insecurity. The destruction of mosques and the targeting of men during prayers symbolized an assault on faith and identity. As one migrant described, "A man with a beard or wearing a cap was instantly viewed with suspicion and could be killed, his home burned, or his family dishonoured." Consequently, migration was not a matter of choice but a desperate act of preservation—of life, faith, and dignity—amid overwhelming oppression.

Theme 2: Economic Displacement and Structural Marginalization

Migration, while initially perceived as a path to safety, brought with it a new set of economic and social hardships. Participants described entering Azad Jammu and Kashmir in states of acute deprivation, having abandoned their property, occupations, and economic security in Indian Occupied Kashmir. The hope for stability and opportunity soon collided with the reality of unemployment, social exclusion, and enduring poverty. As one respondent reflected, "We migrated for the sake of life and to seek a better place to live. But here, the economic circumstances proved even more fatalistic than living in the disputed territory."

The absence of institutional support and systemic discrimination further deepened their marginalization. Many participants expressed frustration that even qualified and skilled individuals were overlooked for employment opportunities due to their identity as migrants. One participant observed, "If you go somewhere for a job and fulfill all the eligibility criteria, being an immigrant alone makes you ineligible." Such testimonies reveal the structural barriers that confined migrants to informal or low-paid work, reinforcing their dependency and exclusion.

Housing insecurity compounded these struggles. Families lived for years in temporary tent settlements, enduring harsh weather conditions and limited access to sanitation, electricity, or clean water. "It was unbearable to live in a tent under the scorching summer heat, and in winter, the thin fabric could not block the cold breeze," recalled one migrant. These experiences reflect the paradox of migration as both refuge and

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hardship—where survival was secured, but dignity and stability remained elusive.

Theme 3: Cultural Continuity and Adaptation

In contrast to the economic and political hardships of displacement, cultural adjustment did not emerge as a major source of tension for the migrants. Respondents consistently highlighted the shared linguistic, religious, and cultural foundations between Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), which greatly facilitated their social integration. The commonalities in customs, attire, festivals, and everyday practices fostered a sense of familiarity and belonging, allowing migrants to re-establish their social identity in a new environment. One participant fondly remarked, "Isn't it beautiful that we own both cultures? We used to eat Pakistani food cooked in the local style, with local ingredients and spices, but in Kashmiri style—one big platter for the whole family."

While minor differences existed in dialects, food preparation, and social norms, migrants perceived these variations as opportunities for cultural enrichment rather than sources of alienation. The widespread use of Urdu and Hindko also facilitated communication and mutual understanding. This cultural proximity enabled migrants to exercise resilience by blending elements of both traditions, nurturing a hybrid identity that strengthened emotional stability and social inclusion. Ultimately, cultural continuity functioned as a powerful coping mechanism, preserving dignity and belonging amid displacement.

Theme 4: Psychological Trauma and Identity Struggles

The psychological impact of forced migration was both profound and enduring. Respondents shared experiences of loss, alienation, and diminished self-worth, reflecting the deep emotional toll of displacement and prolonged marginalization. The transition from a familiar homeland to an uncertain, impoverished existence severely disrupted their sense of identity and belonging. As one participantexpressed, "I wished to go back to my homeland where I may die from a bullet but certainly not of starvation." Such reflections reveal not only nostalgia but also the frustration and disillusionment that accompanied unmet expectations of safety and dignity in the host region.

Many participants reported signs of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and symptoms of migration-related trauma. Separation from family members who remained across the border intensified these feelings of isolation and helplessness. One respondent lamented, "It hurts when locals treat us as if we are a burden. We make acquaintances with those who still see us as inferior." The persistent label of "muhajir" (immigrant) became a symbol of stigma, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and identity fragmentation.

Yet, amid despair, the narratives also illuminated remarkable psychological resilience. Grounded in faith, perseverance, and moral integrity, many migrants took pride in sustaining themselves through honest labor, avoiding crime or dependency. Their optimism—rooted in the belief that "one day all problems will be solved"—reflects an enduring collective strength. This resilience, nurtured by spirituality, community bonds, and cultural continuity, became a vital means of reconstructing hope and identity in the aftermath of displacement.

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Conclusion

The narratives collectively reveal that migration from Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) was not a voluntary movement but a desperate struggle for survival amid systemic violence, political oppression, and dehumanization. Displacement became both an act of resistance and a means to preserve life, faith, and dignity. Yet, while migration ensured physical safety, it simultaneously exposed displaced communities to enduring economic deprivation, social exclusion, and institutional neglect. The absence of stable livelihoods and housing reflected the paradox of survival without security, where safety came at the cost of dignity and stability. Amid these hardships, cultural and religious continuity emerged as a stabilizing force. Shared traditions, language, and faith fostered a sense of belonging, allowing migrants to blend elements of their past and present into a resilient cultural identity. This cultural adaptability not only eased integration but also strengthened emotional well-being and communal solidarity. Despite profound psychological distress—marked by grief, alienation, and identity fragmentation—migrants demonstrated remarkable perseverance rooted in spirituality, moral integrity, and hope. Their stories embody both the suffering and the strength of displaced lives, illustrating the human capacity to reconstruct meaning, community, and resilience even in the aftermath of loss and exile.

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