

Religion, Politics and Peace in Doda

Q: What made you leave the BJP after having served as a senior leader of the party for years?

A: In 1995 I was chosen as Mandal President of the BJP and served in that capacity till 2002. I stood on the BJP ticket as an MLA candidate twice but lost on both occasions. I was also a member of the BJP state council. However, I left the BJP and joined the Congress. The BJP, I realised, is not working for the people. People are now getting fed up of religious fundamentalism and communal politics, and this holds true of Hindus and Muslims alike. Both forms of fundamentalism and communalism feed on each other. There is no spirit of service left in the BJP. That's why I left the party. BJP bosses are not interested in helping our people. I tried to get small things done for our people here and went all the way to Delhi for this but even this the BJP leaders there were not willing to do. Also, there is a lot of corruption in the party, MP funds for Doda were being misused on a large scale.

Q: In the wake of the massacre of several Hindus in Kulhand, near Doda, earlier this year, the BJP alleged that Hindus were being driven out of the district by Muslims. Is that claim correct?

A: The Kulhand massacre led to considerable tension and fear, it is true. But the BJP's effort to communalise the issue was deplorable. Many Muslims were very hurt and angered about the massacre. It is not that Muslims were indifferent. Senior Hindu and Muslim leaders, as well as "ordinary" Hindus and Muslims, are demanding an inquiry into the massacre but this still has not been done. Does the government have something to hide? The truth must be brought out or else it will only further strain Hindu-Muslim relations.

As I was saying, the BJP tried to communalise the issue to set Hindus and Muslims against each other. But this was not a Hindu versus Muslim issue. It was an issue of suffering humanity. So, a large number of Hindus and Muslims of Doda town got together as soon as we heard of the massacre. A call for a complete strike was given from the main mosque and temple in the town. We, a large group of Hindus and Muslims, together went to Kulhand and shared in the grief of the families of those gunned down, provided some material help to them and visited the injured in the hospital. This is the sort of inter-community dialogue that needs to be promoted. Hindus and Muslims are roughly equal in terms of numbers in Doda district. There is no way out but peaceful co-existence.

The BJP claims that the Muslims of Doda are plotting to drive Hindus out of the district. But this is false. The BJP organised a demonstration here after the

Kulhand killings. Top BJP leaders came to address it and such claims were made here. Later, they organised a 'Save Doda' campaign, where they reiterated these claims all over India. But this is not true. In the demonstration that they organised in Doda town there were hardly any people from Kulhand or Doda. Most of them had been brought from outside, and they used this occasion to promote communal antagonism, unmindful of what this would mean for Hindus living here. If the Muslims of Doda were really keen that Hindus should flee, how are my family and thousands of other Hindus still here? Obviously, the BJP is doing all this just for its own political interests. My family has been living here for two hundred years and we have never faced any problem from the local Muslims. At the peak of militancy, both Hindus and Muslims migrated from outlying villages and took refuge in Doda. It is the duty of the government to provide everyone, Hindus and Muslims, with safety.

Q: But what about some militant groups? Some allege that they would like the Hindus to leave. A: I cannot say if some militant outfits want Hindus to flee. I haven't met them, so how can I say? But all I know is that common Muslims here don't want that to happen.

Q: What do you feel about the possibility of a solution to the Kashmir conflict?

A: I am 57 and perhaps the conflict will not be solved in my lifetime. But I do know that the gun is not the way. The gun, wielded by the army or by militants, will only produce more deaths of innocent people. Both forms of atrocities need to be condemned. The only way to solve the Kashmir issue is through dialogue.

Q: What about the possibilities of such dialogue in Doda, between Hindus and Muslims?

A: We are trying to do this in different ways. I think a valuable form of dialogue is through forums that bring together people of different communities to jointly work on issues of common concern. For instance, one way that some sort of dialogue is happening is through the joint demand of a number of Hindus and Muslims of Doda that Doda and nearby districts be brought under a separate Chenab valley Development Council, on the pattern of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council. The Council would focus on common issues affecting everyone in Doda, irrespective of caste and religion, if we get the Council, the people of Doda, Hindus, Dalits and Muslims, can work together for common aims, on common development issues.

Doda is sandwiched between Jammu and the Kashmir valley. Jammu-walas think we are with Kashmir, and the Kashmiris think we are with Jammu, so we have got lost out in between. Our area is very mountainous and remote. It is the largest district in Jammu and Kashmir after Ladakh. The government has hardly invested anything here for development purposes. Our natural resources are being mercilessly exploited. Our dense forests have now been largely cut down. There is great poverty in large parts of our district. Through

the Council we are demanding more investment, more powers to local people to plan policies. The district administration will work under the Council, rather than take orders from bureaucrats in Jammu or Srinagar. In this people of all communities will jointly participate and this can help bring them closer to work together. I think this is a valuable form of inter-community solidarity, when people realise their inter-dependence this way, why will they fight?

Some months ago we set up the All-Parties Development Front for Doda. Most of the political parties are members of it, including the National Conference, PDP, BJP, Congress, People's Democratic Front and Panther Party. Shafi Rangrez, who is associated with the Hurriyat Conference, was appointed as President. Later, he resigned, saying that he is too busy with his other responsibilities, and he appointed me President in his place. Through the Front we are trying to bring all political parties and religious communities to work together for common issues affecting Doda district as a whole, particularly the Doda tehsil. Thus, for instance, the government announced it was setting up a university in Doda town but later sifted it to Bhandarwah, so we got together and protested and the government was forced to agree to establish sub-centres of the university in Doda and Kishtwar. We are also demanding that the government establish a veterinary college and a bridge in Doda. We have the support of both Hindus and Muslims, so is this not an important form of dialogue and inter-communal solidarity?

Q: What about the possibilities of inter-community dialogue through religion? What role can religious leaders play in this regard?

A: Maulvis and Pujaris should stay away from politics. Their work is namaz and puja, and if they get involved they might be biased towards their own communities.

Q: But you cannot rule out the possibility of at least some maulvis and pujaris being able to play a pro-active role in promoting communal harmony?

A: In Benaras, so I heard, a pujari and a maulvi came together to preach peace and harmony in the wake of the deadly blasts there. I wish maulvis and pujaris in Doda would do something like this, but this has not happened. This is a crucial form of dialogue as it might really touch people's hearts and minds and radically transform the way they look at each other and relate to each other as Hindus and Muslims, it will go a long way in promoting communal harmony. But I have never heard of or seen any socially-engaged religious leaders, Hindus or Muslims, who are genuinely working for promoting communal harmony in Doda.

Q: How do you explain this?

A: Till a few years ago, there was only one mosque and one temple in Doda town. But now we have several dozen temples and mosques, but has that helped

improve Hindu-Muslim relations? A major problem is that many of the maulvis and pujaris here are not locals. Many of them have come from outside, from out of Doda and even from out of Jammu and Kashmir. They have little knowledge of our culture, traditions and history. Most of them cannot speak our language. Many of them cannot understand or appreciate the tradition of inter-community solidarity that we have had for centuries here. Some of them might even find it wrong. So, obviously, they cannot provide the sort of religious education we need. Many of them come from places where Hindus and Muslims live separately, without having anything to do with each other, or even from places where only one community lives. And that shapes the way they understand their own religion as well as their relations with people of other faiths. So, how can they understand what it means to live in a place, like Doda, where Hindus and Muslims live and work together in the same localities? How can they play a proactive role in promoting communal harmony?

In the Hindu case, there are very few babas and pujaris in temples in Doda who are locals. Most of them are from outside our district and our state, from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and so on. There are several reasons for this. Traditionally, a very different form of Hinduism has been practised here, such as the pre-Aryan Naga cult. Most Hindus here are non-vegetarian and traditionally worshipped a host of local deities. The Shaivite tradition, which some say is also pre-Aryan, was very strong here. But things have begun to change in recent decades and now Vaishnavite form of Hinduism is quite popular, which is more Sanskritic. So, people think that they need pujaris from outside who know Sanskrit to come and perform pujas in the temples. Also, most local Brahmin families would rather have their children study in modern schools rather than become pujaris. Further, there is widespread poverty and unemployment in places like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and the scope for employment of babas in temples there is limited. So, many of them come here.

Likewise, traditionally there were no major madrasas in Doda for the training of maulvis. In some villages there were small *maktabs* for children. In many villages children used to gather in the home of a village elder who knew something about Islam and learnt from him. Pirs used to come to Doda from Kashmir and provide some sort of religious training, spending some months here and then going back to Kashmir. But that system has changed. To begin with, maulvis from outside, from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, started coming here for tabligh, and some set up madrasas. But still, for higher religious education, students go to big madrasas in Uttar Pradesh.

All this means that new forms religion and religious authority are influencing people in Doda, both Hindus and Muslims. Some of these might reflect exclusivist understandings of religion and community identity. These are undermining our local ways of negotiating our identities in non-exclusivist ways that have traditionally sustained a culture of understanding and peaceful co-existence.

Q: How do you think religious leaders can be mobilised for promoting the more inclusive ways of understanding religion that you feel is crucial for promoting dialogue?

A: Perhaps one way is to establish institutions for preparing local religious specialists and leaders here in Doda itself. These should be designed in such a way as to be sensitive to our context of religious pluralism and our tradition of communal harmony, sharing and solidarity. They should be educated in accordance with our own context and environment. They should be made to be more socially engaged. This engagement should not be limited only to their own community but must extend to others, too. As of now, most maulvis, babas and pujaris remain confined to their mosques, madrasas and temples. Their interaction is almost wholly with members of their own community. They have little or no active social engagement with people of other communities. That, however, must be encouraged. This will lead to a major change in the way they relate to other communities and this, in turn, can impact on their own people whom they preach to. Perhaps one can start by forming a platform where socially engaged Hindu and Muslim religious leaders who are committed to humanity can come together, not to rebut the claims of different religions, as is often the case, but to exhort Hindus and Muslims to work together for humanity, for common aims and for true spirituality. ❄❄❄

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[Kulbhushan Gupta is a veteran politician from Doda town in Jammu and Kashmir. He served as Mandal President of the local unit of the BJP for several years. He is now with the Congress party. In this interview with Yoginder Sikand he talks about religion, politics and prospects for peace in Doda.]