

RETURNING TO THE PAST?

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Doda district in Jammu and Kashmir has a roughly equal Hindu and Muslim population. This makes it unique because all other districts in the state of J & K have a clear Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist majority. In the last fifteen years inter-community dynamics in Doda have undergone considerable change, owing to various factors, including the introduction of new forms of religion and the impact of right-wing Hindu and Muslim movements, modern education, communications and the media. Political developments, particularly the ongoing militant movement and the response of the state, have also impacted seriously on community identities and inter-communal relations in Doda. The district has witnessed sporadic and limited incidents of communal violence, but this has happened in only a few places. In large parts of the district, Hindus and Muslims continue to live together reasonably peacefully in common localities, in marked contrast to large parts of India, where, typically, the communities live in separate localities. However, the ongoing conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, including selective killings of Hindus by militants, rather Islamic fanatics and by the armed forces, have undoubtedly led to increased communal polarisation, prejudices and suspicions, in short, then, communalism in contemporary Doda is a very modern phenomenon, and is not, as some argue, a return to past, 'primitive' ways of defining and living out community identities.

Doda's denizens make it a point to argue that traditionally their society has been relatively free of communal strife. Hamid, an elderly man from Kishtwar, tells this correspondent that barring some parts of the district, like Muslim-majority Bhesala and Hindu-majority Bhadarwah, there was no major communal rioting in Doda even in the wake of the Partition, when the rest of Jammu province was aflame. 'In the Partition days', he reminisces, 'we formed groups of Muslim and Hindu youngsters to patrol the town at night to keep out intruders. That is why there was no violence here'.

Most Muslims in Doda are migrants from south Kashmir, particularly from the Anantnag or Islamabad district. 'They came here some two centuries ago. Some people say that they came fleeing the oppression of the Sikhs or the Afghans or in the wake of a severe drought', says Husain, a student from Doda. 'At that time', he explains, 'Doda was inhabited almost entirely by Hindus and Dalits', when the Muslims came they were given lands in the higher reaches of the mountains. The better lands, in the lower reaches of the mountains and in the valleys, remained in the hands of the Hindus. Even now this is the general pattern.

The Muslim immigrants in Doda settled down to work as small peasants, agricultural workers and tenants in the fields of the dominant caste Hindus,

mainly Minhas and Kotwal Rajputs as well as Brahmins, Husain says. A few Muslims who supported the Dogra regime got small estates from the ruling authorities, but, by and large, Muslims were an impoverished community. Muslim peasants were forced to render begar or free labour for Dogra officials. Local Dalits were also subjected to similar treatment. 'But still there were no riots here', says Husain. 'The local Hindus accepted the Muslims in their land and allowed them to settle and live here in relative peace', he explains. 'People here, Muslims and Hindus, are generally soft-hearted'.

Traditionally, Muslims and Hindus in Doda shared a broadly similar culture. 'Muslim men would also wear kurta and pajama, like Hindu men. However, around two decades ago they largely abandoned this for the shalwar kameez, which they somehow, but wrongly, think is more properly Muslim. Maybe this was because of the influence from Kashmir or the desire to look different from others', says Mahmud from Kishtwar. 'But now this difference is not so important', he goes on. 'Our youngsters, both Hindu and Muslim, are taking to Western clothes. They are abandoning our culture, wrongly thinking that everything from the West is good', he laments.

In Doda town, Mahmud says, some Muslims would participate in the Ram Leela celebrations. 'Such a thing is quite unimaginable now, as you can well understand', he says, 'In fact', he goes on, 'in the wake of militancy here the Hindus stopped performing the Ram Leela in public and now do it inside their main temple, who knows what can happen if it is done in public? Someone, Hindu or Muslim or some government agent, might throw a bomb in the crowd and innocent people might be killed, so it's probably better not to have the celebrations in public'.

Doda's most well-known Sufi saint is Hazrat Shah Fariduddin Baghdadi. His shrine in Kishtwar still attracts scores of Hindus, in addition to Muslims. Ram Thakur, a Hindu from Doda, who says he holds the saint in high regard. He was 'a great faqir'. 'He led a simple, austere life', he explains. 'He spent much of his time in meditation. Some Hindus were deeply impressed by him and some converted to Islam at his hands'.

When Shah Fariduddin Baghdadi came to Nagari, which is now the centre of Doda town, Ram Thakur goes on, a Thakur Rajput family was deeply impressed by him, so much so that a girl from that family was given in marriage to him. some land was also given by the Thakur family to the Sufi, where a mosque today stands. Till today, the descendants of this family, who are Hindus, have a special bond with the shrine of Shah Fariduddin, next to which their ancestor, his Rajput wife, Malahat Bibi, is buried.

Other local forms of religion brought Hindus and Muslims together in parts of Doda. For centuries, the main form of 'Hinduism' practised here has been the Nag cult or the worship of snakes, which are associated with ponds and streams. This is a pre-Aryan tradition. 'Maybe it was associated with the local Dravidians, who are now treated as 'low' caste Dalits, and was incorporated or appropriated by the invading Aryans', says Raj, a Dalit student from Kishtwar. 'Earlier', he says, 'some Muslims used to go to the Nag shrines, not to worship,

but to take part in the fun and frolic during the annual pilgrimages. But that is now almost stopped because communal differences are now more clear and pronounced’.

‘Homogenisation of cultures and identities has happened along with what is considered modernisation’, explains Ali, a student from Bhadarwah. He says some 26 languages and dialects are spoken in Doda district, reflecting the fact that there are so many different ethnic communities here, both Hindu and Muslim. This diversity has been sustained by the topography of the district, being extremely mountainous, with people living in narrow valleys and on top of high mountains, which are still difficult to access. ‘But now’, says Ali, ‘there is a relentless pressure for smaller identities to give way’. ‘Thus, for instance’, he explains, ‘the *watali* language is almost extinct, so, too, is the Pakhtun language, which was spoken by families living in two villages here . Likewise, a range of local crafts, song forms and dances are all dying out’, Ali points out. ‘There is only one person-a Muslim in Doda-who can make the special horn-shaped trumpet used by Hindus in their local religious festivals’, he says, ‘and even his sons have possibly stopped making them, being employed in government service’.

‘Modernisation’ has also impacted on local understandings of religious identity. Over the last several decades, new forms of Brahminical Hinduism have entered Doda, as a result of which the local pre-Aryan Nag cults are gradually giving way. These are now seen, particularly by some young people, as less authentically Hindu, as somehow ‘primitive’, possibly because they involve animal sacrifices and wading through fire. They are set against Brahminic understandings of Hinduism, which are projected as normative, and which are relentlessly broadcast through the media and by Hindu organisations such as the BJP and the RSS, which have established a fairly strong presence in the district.

Traditionally, Doda has been a stronghold of Shaivism but recent decades have witnessed the spread of new, more Brahminical Vaishnavite forms of religion, as manifested in the setting up of temples of Ram and Krishna, a novelty in this region. The Hindus of Doda, including even the Brahmins, have been non-vegetarians, but the new vaishnavites see this as ‘un-Hindu’. Most of the ‘babas’ and pujaris in the new vaishnavite temples are from outside, mainly from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Several, although not all, of them are passionate supporters of the Hindu right-wing, and make no bones about this.

Likewise, in the Muslim case, a range of local practices, cults and traditions are now being contested, being seen as ‘un-Islamic’, ‘primitive’ and as not being sanctioned in the shariah. This reflects alternate understandings of Islam, which claim to be more ‘authentic’, as represented by groups such as the Tablighi jama’at, the Jama’at-i-Islami and the Anl-i-Hadith, which have established an important presence in the region in recent decades. Traditionally, there were but few madrasas in Doda. For religious education children would study in maktabas attached to mosques or in the homes of village elders who had some knowledge of the faith. Pirs from Kashmir would

travel in the area in the summers, teach children certain Islamic beliefs and practices, perform certain rituals for families and return to Kashmir in the winters. For this they would be paid in kind. This system was, in a sense, hierarchical and, at times, exploitative. The more shariah-centred forms of Islam, promoted by developments in communications and media and articulated by new Islamic movements as well as madrasas, a new development in Doda, are making access to Islamic scriptural resources more widely available. But, at the same time, as in the Hindu case, some of these forms of religion are defined in more exclusivist and narrow ways. Says Husain, a Muslim from Kishtwar who reveres the Sufis, 'The wahhabis and similar types of people adopt a very literalist approach. They think only they are right and that all others, be they Muslims or others, are wrong'.

'They say more 'modern' education is an antidote to communalism', says Muhammad, a shopkeeper from Kishtwar, 'but I don't know if this is true. The sort of education that is imparted these days in schools has little or no moral content. They do not tell children anything about what Imam Ali did or what the Buddha taught. Children are being trained to be aggressively competitive. In schools they are taught that their future is to land up with a fancy job. And so this cut-throat competition, which is also what competing forms of communalism are all about, is deeply-rooted in the education system, which simply trains people for the market. So you can see how this sort of education promotes communalism'.

In the past, when there were no such 'modern' schools, Muhammad says, people were taught to be content with their lives. They thought more of the hereafter, about the life that comes after death. 'That's one reason why they learnt to accept one another', he argues. 'But today, the mass media and the education system are all geared to forcing us not to think about these higher things, about the reality of death and the short-lived nature of this world. By creating ever more new needs and desires, they are forcing us to become even more immersed in this world. And this further fuels communalism, which is essentially all about communities or their leaders competing with each other for worldly goods and power.'

'So', Muhammad announces, 'I think that, generally, poor people who may not have had any 'modern' education are less communal than many 'modern' educated people. The leaders of all communal groups, Hindu and Muslim, have fancy degrees from colleges and universities. I think that proves my point. And they are the ones to mislead poor, uneducated people'.

'Some people say that if we open up more to the outside world inter-communal relations will improve', says Mohan., 'They think that by joining what they call the "mainstream" things will get better. But I doubt it. One must understand that the new forms of religion and religious identity that seek to pit Hindus and Muslims against each other have been introduced from the outside. These are not local forms of religion. Earlier, Doda was cut off from the rest of the world by a series of high mountains. It was very difficult for outsiders to enter this area. This is why, over the centuries, Hindus and Muslims evolved their own ways of relating to each other. There was never any

communal problem here. But with the roads and television and radio and newspapers, things are rapidly changing. New, aggressive forms of Hinduism and Islam that are predicated on an undying hatred for each other are entering this area from outside due to this communications revolution. And news of communal violence anywhere else is quickly relayed to the people here now, and that impacts on inter-community relations here, too. Earlier this would take days, if not months, if at all'.

'Neither the Hindutvawalas nor the (Islamic) militants are really pious people', Mohan insists. 'They just use religion for worldly ends. Most of them are not really spiritual people. But they play havoc with people's lives here in the name of religion'.

'The problem is immense', Muhammad says. 'But when you think that we have just one very short life and if you keep that constantly in mind, you can develop a certain distance from the world. You'll realise that we shouldn't take the world too seriously, because there's a life after death too. And if people begin to think of that life often, why would they fight over worldly trifles?, If we all thought in this way, there would possibly be no communal conflict'.

Mohan and Muhammad look at each other and nod in agreement. *zz*