

Religion and Politics

Yoginder Sikand

Many Kashmiri Muslims vociferously insist that the demand for independence of Kashmir has nothing to do with religion. Instead, they argue, that the conflict in and over Kashmir is essentially 'political'. What is conveniently ignored by those who make this claim is that religion and politics, particularly in the case of the Kashmir dispute, involving as it does the rival claims of Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-dominated India, can hardly be separated.

As the current spate of violence in both the Hindu-dominated Jammu division and the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley, triggered off by a controversial decision of the state government to allot a piece of land to a Hindu temple trust, so starkly indicates, religion and communal identities defined essentially in religious terms have everything to do with the basic issue of Jammu and Kashmir and its still unsettled political status. Kashmiri nationalists, in contrast to hardcore Islamists and the Hindutva brigade, quickly dismiss this point, finding it, perhaps, too embarrassing, afraid of being labeled as religious chauvinists or 'communal'. But, no longer, it seems, can the crucial role of religion in shaping the contours of the on-going conflict in and over Kashmir be denied.

That the on-going BJP-inspired agitation in Jammu has marshalled considerable support among the Hindus of Jammu clearly indicates that the political project of Kashmiri nationalists—of a separate, independent state of Jammu and Kashmir—has absolutely no takers among the Hindus (and other non-Muslims) of the state. Kashmiri nationalists insist that in the independent Jammu and Kashmir of their dreams, religious minorities—Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists—who would account for almost a fourth of the population, would have equal rights and no cause for complaint. Some even boast, without adducing any evidence, of commanding the support of the non-Muslims of the state for their project. At the same time as they roundly berate the Dogra Raj as a long spell of slavery for the state's Muslims, they insist that the boundaries of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, as constructed by the same Dogras, against the will of the Kashmiri Muslims, be considered as sacrosanct, as setting the borders of the independent country that they demand. If, as they argue, Dogra Raj was illegitimate, then surely there is nothing holy about the state boundaries as laid down by the Dogras, bringing Jammu and the vastly different Kashmir Valley in a forced union. If, as they rightly insist, Kashmir was conquered against its will by the Dogras of Jammu, there is no reason why the forced union of the two should continue in the independent Jammu and Kashmir that the Kashmiri nationalists dream of, particularly given the Jammu Hindus' resentment of alleged Kashmiri hegemony, a sentiment shared even by many Jammu Muslims.

Kashmiri nationalists, however, would refuse to recognize this basic contradiction in their argument. The reason is obvious: To do so, to recognize that the Jammu's Hindus (and Leh's Buddhists) would resist, even to the point of violence, the agenda of an independent Jammu and Kashmir would clearly indicate the obvious, but embarrassing fact, that this agenda represents the

aspirations and interests largely of Kashmiri Muslims, and is a means to legitimize Kashmiri Muslim control over the rest of the state.

The analogy with pre-Partition India is useful. The Muslim League insisted that because the Hindus of India were in a numerical majority, a united, independent India, no matter what safeguards it gave and promises of equality it made to the Muslims, would be dominated by the Hindus, and would, for all its secular and democratic claims, be untrammelled Hindu Raj. Hence their demand for a separate Pakistan. The Hindus of Jammu and the Buddhists of Leh find themselves in precisely the same position as did supporters of the Muslim League in pre-Partition India, only now the actors have reversed their roles. Kashmiri nationalists insist they want an independent, united Jammu and Kashmir, just as the Congress did when it talked of a united and free India. And, like the Congress did with the Muslims, they promise the non-Muslim minorities of Jammu and Leh that their rights would be fully protected in this state of their dreams. Yet, just as many Muslims refused to accept the promises of the Congress, fearing that they would never be honoured, the non-Muslim minorities in Jammu and Kashmir refuse to buy the arguments of the Kashmiri nationalists, which they rightly see as a thinly-veiled guise to justify Kashmiri muslim hegemony.

Strangely, Kashmiris, come up with the most ingenious arguments to counter the above point. 'Kashmiri-yat, the teachings of love and peace of our Sufis, unite us all and would ensure that non-Muslim minorities will be safe and protected in a free Jammu and Kashmir', some of them say. A laughable claim, unless all Kashmiris suddenly decide to shun the world and trod the mystical path, an unlikely prospect. Sufism is in a rapid state of decline in Kashmir and elsewhere, as is the case with all other forms of mysticism.

Then there is another bizarre argument, among others, from none less than one of the chief ideologues of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* in Kashmir and a fervent backer of Kashmir's accession to Pakistan, which runs like this: Islam lays down the rights of non-Muslims and insists that Muslims should respect them. The Prophet Muhammad himself did so. So, if Jammu and Kashmir gets freedom and becomes a truly Islamic state, the non-Muslim minorities will have full freedom and equality. That the Islamists whom he led had hardly done anything to promote anything even remotely approaching that sort of confidence among the state's minorities—in fact doing almost everything to completely alienate them—did not even cross his mind. The late Sadullah Tantrey, once head of the Jammu branch of the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, even went on to insist, in all seriousness, that 'Indeed so happy will the non-Muslims of Jammu and Kashmir be in this independent Islamic state that even Hindus from India would line up to settle in the state.' This writer squirmed in his seat as he went on, stunned at his evident ignorance or hypocrisy or, as seemed more likely, both. The fate of minorities in scores of Muslim countries, even those like Saudi Arabia that claim to be 'Islamic', was deplorable, that even Jinnah had promised full equality to the non-Muslim citizens of Pakistan but that had not prevented them from being reduced to virtual second-class citizens, and that, simply put, he was lying or else living in a fool's paradise.

Clearly, any forced union of the disparate nationalities in Jammu and Kashmir in the form of a separate, independent state that Kashmiri nationalists champion

(as now do even some Kashmiri Islamists, former passionate advocates for union with Pakistan, who, flowing with the tide, have realized that their earlier stance has increasingly few takers among Kashmiris, given their mounting disenchantment with Pakistan) would be a sure recipe for civil war [or communal war]. The current agitation in Jammu is ample evidence of that. It is time, therefore, that pro-'Azadi' Kashmiri leaders admit this publicly.

This is not, however, to plead the case for the division of the state, as the RSS has been advocating, for surely that would further harden communal boundaries and rivalries in just the same way as would the project of an independent Jammu and Kashmir. Rather, it is to recognize and publicly acknowledge the very plural character of Jammu and Kashmir, and the concerns and sensitivities of all its peoples, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others. □□□