

Jammu, Temples, Dargahs

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The agitation over the Amarnath shrine in Kashmir has to snowball into a full-fledged communal conflict. The violence and the passions that have erupted in its wake are reminiscent although on a much smaller scale, of the terror and mayhem that tore apart Jammu in 1947 in the wake of the Partition. Some two lakh Muslims according to some accounts, are said to have been slaughtered in the Jammu region, and many more forced to flee across to Pakistan, while, at the same time, the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley remained almost entirely peaceful. Communal forces have long had a strong presence in Jammu (and in the Valley as well) and the current agitation in Jammu and the economic blockade of the Kashmir Valley has provided them with a chance to rear their ugly heads once again.

Jammu is burning. Slogan-raising irate mobs. Vehicles and offices on fire. Roads blocked. Long spells of curfew. Dozens of houses of Gujjar Muslims, who have consistently opposed the on-going violence in Kashmir, burnt to ashes.

For the past almost two decades this writer has been visiting the Jammu province almost every year without fail, to meet friends, visit places; and trek in the mountains. Jammu advertises itself as the 'City of Temples', but one also finds the scores of dargahs, gracefully-domed shrines built over the graves of Sufi saints or Pirs that are scattered across the town, more interesting. Unlike temples and mosques, people of all faiths and castes flock to the dargahs. They provide the only arena where people of different communities participate together in common worship; and devotion. They have a message for all in these times of hatred and violence in the name of religion and community, one that few care to hear, as the seemingly endless war in Kashmir and the on-going agitation in Jammu so tragically illustrate.

The stories that are told about several of the shrines in the town—their foundational myths, one could call them—reflect a fascinating historical process of negotiation of inter-community relations in a harmonious way. These stories are often invoked to stress the point that people of different religions should live together in peace, that God is one, that all humans, at a certain level, are basically the same, and so on.

The first major Sufi to come to the Jammu region was Pir Raushan Ali Shah, whose dargah is located near the famous Raghunath Mandir, in the heart of Jammu town. He is said to have performed many miracles, which, so it is claimed, so impressed the Hindu Raja of Jammu that he became his devotee and requested him to settle in his city. When the Pir died, the Raja had a grave constructed for him, which today is a popular place of pilgrimage for Hindus and Muslims alike. Tucked away in an obscure corner of the market named after him in Jammu's busy commercial district is the dargah of Pir Lakhdatta. After his death, it is said, half his body was taken by his Muslim disciples and buried according to Muslim rites. To his Muslim followers he is known as Zahir Pir. The other half of his body was cremated by his Hindu followers, who revere him as Pir Lakhdatta. Another such shared shrine, skirting the boundary walls of the Jammu airport, is the sprawling dargah of Baba Budhan Ali Shah, which is particularly popular among the local Sikhs, for the Baba is said to have been a close friend of Guru Nanak.

At Ramnagar, on the outskirts of Jammu on the road to Srinagar, is the popular Sufi shrine of the Panj Pirs, the five Muslim saints. Legend has it that five brothers of a Muslim family spent many years at the spot where the shrine stands in meditation and then left to go their own ways. One day the five Pirs appeared in a dream to the Maharaja and admonished him for sleeping with his feet pointing to their chillah, the place where they used to meditate. The next morning, the Maharaja ordered the spot to be excavated, and an umbrella and five kettledrums were found. Believing this to be a holy place, he ordered the construction of a dargah there. He then, appointed his royal charioteer, Alif Shah, and a Muslim woman, Khurshid Begum, as custodians of the shrine. The last time this writer visited the shrine it was looked after by a Hindu Rajput, husband of Khurshid Begum's daughter.

And then there is the shrine of Pir Mitha, located on a promontory on the banks of the Tawi, and connected, through myth and ritual to a Shaivite shrine on the other side of the river. The Pir is said to have come to Jammu in the reign of Raja Ajab Dev in the 15th century. One day, the story goes, the Raja's wife fell seriously ill. The Pir cured the queen, by performing a miracle, as a result of which the king and many of his subjects became his disciples. Because of this, he had to face stiff opposition from some Hindu priests. His most vehement opponent, was Siddh Garib Nath, a Shaivite yogi. However, the two soon became friends. Indeed, so close did they become that they decided to settle down together in the cave where the Pir lived. This cave is known as Pir Khoh or the 'Cave of the Pir'. Legend has it that the yogi entered the cave and travelled all the way to Mattan in Kashmir, never to return again. After he disappeared, his disciples came to Pir Mitha, requesting him to accept them as his followers. The Pir declined, instructing them to be faithful to their own guru. When this failed to satisfy them, the Pir relented somewhat and told them that they could, if they wanted, take his title of 'Pir', associated with Muslim mystics. That is why the cave is today called, as Pir Khoh and the heads of the Nath yogis who still reside there are known as Pirs.

Also there is the shrine of Baba Jiwan Shah, in the heart of Jammu town. The Baba, born in the mid-nineteenth century, took Sufi path at a young age, travelling from his native Punjab and settling in a Muslim graveyard in Jammu, preaching and making disciples, who included Hindus as well as Muslims. Among these were Pratap Singh, ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, and his brother Amar Singh. The Maharaja fixed a regular monthly stipend for him and would invite him to his palace. But, true to his Sufi tradition, he seemed to have cared nothing for power and pelf. One of his chief disciples was an impoverished man from the Chamar or leather-working caste considered as 'untouchable' by caste Hindus, who now rests in a dargah of his own adjacent to that of the Baba.

Shrines of men who trod the mystical path, who transcended narrow barriers of caste and creed. Shrines that speak of a different Jammu. Of the possibility of a different way of looking at, dealing with and going beyond with communal differences. One wonders what the men who lie buried below their domes would have to say about the mayhem that is tearing apart their town and beyond in the name of religion and community. □□□