

WHITHER KASHMIR?

Competing Nationalisms and Religions

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Even if India were to pave the streets of Kashmir with gold, we would still refuse to identify ourselves as Indians', insisted a Kashmiri Muslim friend named 'Salim' [not the real name], the other day. "Salim" is no fervent Islamist or fiery Kashmiri nationalist. Indeed, he is completely lax in matters religious, bordering on the agnostic, and has scores of non-Muslim and non-Kashmiri or what he calls "Indian" friends. Yet, like many other Kashmiri Muslims, he passionately advocates independence for his homeland. 'We Kashmiris were never Indians, and can never accept to call ourselves so', he argues. He thinks the boys taking on thousands of well-armed Indian troops in the streets of Srinagar and Sopore today, armed with just stones as weapons, are being foolish—it will only result in even more tragic loss of Kashmiri life, he rues—but he resolutely believes in what they are fighting for—*azadi* or freedom.

Contrary to what the Indian state might insist, it is not for economic development that the Kashmiris are out on the streets protesting today. It is not for better houses, government jobs, tarred roads and regular supply of electricity that thousands of Kashmiri youth took to armed struggle two decades ago. Visitors to Kashmir are struck by the fact that the sort of endemic poverty that characterizes large parts of India is hardly visible in Kashmir—everyone has a house and at least a bit of land, and people generally look healthier and better-fed than in India and this despite the last two decades of strife that have played havoc with the local economy. The only beggars one comes across in Srinagar are dark skinned 'Indians' from Bihar, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pra-desh. The gangs of men and women who slave on treacherous roads up in the mountains in rural Kashmir are mainly short, snub-nosed Ho and *Santal Adivasis* from Chhota Nagpur. Srinagar abounds with huge mansions, unimaginable even in the most posh parts of New Delhi—it is not for nothing that Kashmir is ranked as one of the most corrupt states in India, much of the largesse provided by the Government of India to win the allegiance of the Kashmiris lands up lining the pockets of many of those who inhabit such palatial homes.

True, there are poor people in Kashmir, but generally speaking, poverty is no way as acute in Kashmir as it is in large parts of what the Kashmiris call 'India'. That being the case, no amount of loans, grants and income-generation projects funded by the Government of India are likely to make much of a dent in many Kashmiri Muslims' fervent desire for independence from India or to 'win in the Kashmiris' hearts', to use the phrase much bandied about by Indian politicians and journalists alike. Nor are dire warnings that an independent Kashmir would hardly be able to economically survive, leave alone thrive, or assurances that it is bound to hurtle into interminable economic chaos if it joins Pakistan.

'Man does not live by bread alone', Salim sagely quotes the Bible when this writer points all this out to him, and then again, 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'

If it is not for lack of jobs or out of desperate poverty that many Kashmiri Muslims continue to dream of freedom from India, then what is it that drives them in what seems to be a never-ending war against one of the mightiest armies of the world, in which, so far they have lost more than a hundred thousand of their own? The whole complex Kashmir imbroglio can be reduced to two basic factors : Competing narratives, claims and demands of nationalism and of religion. Nationalisms and religions are total and can be—as is so blatantly apparent in Kashmir and India—totalitarian, ideologies that brook no compromise with those, perceived as 'enemies', who act as foils to construct a certain identity of the national and or religious self.

In a dominant Kashmiri Muslim reading of history, the denizens of the Kashmir Valley are seen as having a unique cultural and ethnic identity of their own and one which demands that it be expressed in a political form in the shape of an independent Kashmiri state. In this narrative, the historical cultural links with 'India' are sometimes and that, too reluctantly- recognized, but these are seen as merely incidental and as having become attenuated over the centuries when the vast majority of the Kashmiris abandoned Hinduism and Buddhism and turned Muslim. The demand for a free state of Kashmir also grows out of a historical perception of being ruled by others for centuries: by the Mughals, the Pathans, the Sikhs, the Dogras, and now by the Indians and in so-called 'Azad' Kashmir, by the Pakistanis. It is also a demand based on the logic of the Partition of India that both Indian and Pakistani leaders accepted. It constantly evokes the solemn promise given to the Kashmiris none other than India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that India would honor its commitment to the United Nations to allow the Kashmiris to decide their own political future a promise that India, sixty years on has miserably failed to abide by despite the Indian state's triumphal and deafening claims of being the largest democracy in the world.

On the other hand, the dominant Indian nationalist narrative has no space for a separate Kashmiri nation as a political entity. It demands that the Kashmiris must, even through force, recognize themselves as Indians and their land as an integral and indivisible part of India. The two nationalisms thus have no meeting point, and neither of them is willing to make even the slightest concession to the other.

Competing understanding of religion and religion-based identity are the other principal basis for the desire of many Kashmiri Muslims to be independent of India. This, in turn, is inextricable linked to the notion of the religious "other" in dominant understanding of Islam. This notion can be construed in a positive, respectful way. But that has been the voice of only a small minority of Muslim eccentrics, mystics and modernists, who continue to remain on the fringe, often castigated as deviant and inauthentic. The dominant understanding of the religious "other" in Muslim thought (globally, and not just in Kashmir) is brazenly dismissive and condemnatory. Non-Muslims are typically seen as disbelieving *kafirs*, followers of undistilled falsehood, and as inveterate enemies of God and of Islam and its adherents. They are believed to be doomed to eternal punishment in Hell.

The spread of conservative and supremacist versions of Islam in recent years in Kashmir, as represented, for instance, by the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Tablighi Jamat and the Wahhabi Ahl-e Hadith has only further exacerbated these exclusivist tendencies and perceptions. Many of those associated with or influenced by such movements regard Hindus (and other non-Muslims) as deviant and Godless, and, in many cases, simply by definition as 'enemies of Islam' and as allegedly collectively engaged in a grand global

conspiracy against the faith, close social interaction with non-Muslims and following their ways is frowned upon, in many cases, sternly condemned, for this is seen as threatening to dilute the Muslims' own commitment to Islam. Ideally, in this worldview, Islam and its followers must dominate over others. "Islam has come to dominate the world", they insist. Not surprisingly, the idea of the Kashmiri Muslims being part of a wider Indian state that includes within its ambit people of different religions who enjoy identical rights is seen as anathema in this way of viewing the world.

Such exclusivist tendencies have received a further boost with modern communications bringing instant news of Muslims in various parts of the world, and in India itself, suffering various forms of discrimination and violence at the hands of others. Every instance of violence and discrimination directed against Muslims in other parts of India, by Hindu chauvinists often hand-in-glove with agencies of the state, reinforces many Kashmiri Muslims' desire for independence from India at the same time as it also strengthens negative understandings of people of other faiths, particularly the Hindus. In this regard, it seems quite likely that had the Indian state taken a consistently firm line with regard to vociferously anti-Muslim Hindu chauvinist groups in India from the very outset something that it chose not to do, thus revealing the truth of its secular pretensions the general Kashmiri Muslims' perception of India and the Hindus in general might not have been as adversarial as it has now become. Further, every instance of Indian state repression of the Kashmiri Muslims which, as newspaper reports indicate, continues unabated only further fortifies opposition to India and hardens exclusivist views about the Hindus, making prospects for peaceful reconciliation even more remote.

But, to set the balance straight, it is also true that the status of the religious "other" in the general Hindu perception is by no means problematic. In the course of a study of Hindu-Muslim relations in Doda the only district in Jammu and Kashmir where Hindus and Muslims live in almost equal numbers, this writer has numerous self-styled Hindu sadhus curiously enough, none of them were locals, almost all being from impoverished parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—who, with some notable exceptions, uniformly thought of Muslims as impure, cow-slaying demons, and believed that Hindus ought to have nothing whatsoever to do with them. Most of them were bitterly critical of local Hindus who had enjoyed cordial relations with their Muslim neighbours for centuries. The problem of negative stereotypes about the religious 'other' in Kashmir is thus by no means a solely Muslim monopoly.

Islamist ideologues in Kashmir insist that the conflict in Kashmir is not a political one. Rather, they argue and here they strangely echo, Hindu chauvinists—it is all about religion, or what they christen as a *jihad*. In an interview a few years back Syed Ali Gilani, the principal Islamist ideologue in Kashmir, and the man whose word seems to have become law for the mobs protesting on Srinagar's streets today, declared that the conflict in Kashmir was one between Islam, on the one hand, and *kufr* or infidelity, on the other. Naturally, in a war of such cosmic proportions, there was absolutely no room for compromise. 'For a Muslim to live in a non-Muslim dominated society', so Gilani claimed, 'is as difficult as it is for a fish out of water.' As he interpreted it, Islam could not countenance the Kashmiri Muslims living with India. Islam, he went on, demanded that the Kashmiri Muslims continue to struggle for separation from non-Muslim-dominated India and to set up what he called an "Islamic state".

But, what, about the non-Muslims of Jammu and Kashmir, who account for almost a half of the state's population? Surely they were not enthusiastic supporters of his 'Islamic

state' project? 'Of course they will support us', Gilani shot back, 'if we properly convince them of the beauty of such a state. In the Islamic state we hope to establish, all communities will have their rights, and all will be happy. There will be perfect justice, for minorities. Not like Hindu-dominated India, where Muslims suffer so many disabilities'. When this writer asked the same question to the late Sadullah Tantrey, former head of the Jammu unit of the Jamaat-e Islami of Jammu and Kashmir, he retorted with a well-rehearsed reply : 'The Islamic state that we are fighting for will prove to be a blessing for the Hindus of our state. Indeed, it will be so just that Hindus from other parts of India will pine to flock here.'

There is, needless to say, no likelihood of non-Muslims taking these pious claims at all seriously—the writings of radical Islamist ideologues, based on their particularly skewed interpretation of Islam, about the status of non-Muslims (condemned as second-class *dhimmis*) as well as the practice of most Muslim states, particularly those that claim to be more religiously inclined, towards their non-Muslim minorities (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan under the Taliban being the most notorious in this regard), are sufficiently odious to keep non-Muslims from probing the promises of the likes of Gilani and Tantrey any further.

How, in the face of the obvious opposition of the Hindus of Jammu and the Buddhists of Leh (and probably most of the Shias of Shia-majority Kargil) to separation from India the champions of an independent Jammu and Kashmir can continue to claim to be the sole voice of the people of the state? Gilani and other Kashmiri Islamist leaders consistently argue that what they want is for the whole of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, including Hindu-dominated Jammu and Buddhist-dominated Leh, to secede from India and form part of an independent "Islamic state" of Jammu and Kashmir or else join Pakistan. They curiously ignore the obvious contradiction in their stance in this regard opposing what they call 'Hindu Indian colonialism' in Kashmir while at the same time championing what, from the point of view of the non-Muslims and non-ethnic Kashmiris, would be Muslim Kashmiri colonialism in Jammu and Kashmir. 'You cannot munch on your *kabab* and want your goat, too', they need to be told, rephrasing a metaphor in a manner these men might be more comfortable with.

Contrary to depictions in some sections of the Indian media, it is not that the Islamist project of the likes of Gilani and the Lashkar-e Tayyeba is widely shared by most Kashmiri Muslims. Not many of them would want Kashmir to be ruled by the likes of the Taliban or even the Jamaat-e Islami. There are scores of Kashmiris, practicing Muslims, who vociferously insist that the radical Islamists' version of Islam is not Islamic at all. Yet, few dare to speak out against the claims made in their name and that of their religion by the radicals: this could well cost them their lives, in the same way as speaking out against the claims of the Indian state over Kashmir has cost the lives of literally thousands of their people.

And so, trapped by competing narratives of nationalism and religion, the continuing violence in Kashmir is likely to persist until, perhaps, human beings are able to devise more open and inclusive understandings of the bases of human association. □□□