
A Memory of Religious Plurality in Jammu & Kashmir

Introduction

On the international arena, the notion of ‘Jammu & Kashmir’ (or the Kashmir region) is often associated with being the bone of contention between the two South Asian nuclear rivals; India and Pakistan. The 1947 Partition of British India into the Hindu-majority secular republic of India and the Muslim-majority Islamic republic of Pakistan initiated the conflict over the border region of Kashmir that continues to this day. While forces of nationalism may have lied at the heart of the dispute, factors of religion play an increasingly important role in understanding the prevailing, incessant violence which is rooted in the Kashmir Valley. For Indian authorities, the Muslim-majority territory has posed a challenge which Pakistan, not denying any territorial ambitions, has exploited by disguising itself as the protector of Muslim rights. In the contemporary era, where religion has increasingly evolved into a pivotal marker of identity among Kashmiris, it can be difficult to imagine that the region was once a melting pot of various ethnicities and religious faiths.

The traditions of religious pluralism have deep roots in the history of the Kashmir Valley. Customarily, while the presence of numerous religious communities could be considered the perfect recipe for bitterness and animosity, the early history of Kashmir – when Buddhism, Hinduism, Kashmir Shaivism, and later Sufism simultaneously flourished - contradicts this equation. Unsurprisingly, this is not to say that communal peace and equality have incessantly thrived in the region, rather, coexistence between communities in Kashmir has generally remained synchronized in harmony despite of the various cultures and religions implanted by different dynasties over centuries. Even when India was afflicted with the Partition on religious lines, the Kashmiris were proudly maintaining communal harmony and interfaith diversity. At a time when Islamist nationalism was on the march in Pakistan in the 1970s, and Hindu nationalism was taking root in India in the 1980s, Kashmiri syncretism continued to thrive without major disturbances. Indeed, while the region has long been characterized by religious diversity, it is only the last few generations that have witnessed the transformation of this diversity into sectarian and communal violence.

This paper briefly traces the history of the Kashmir Valley, often eulogised as ‘Paradise on Earth’, thereby delineating the genesis of religious pluralism in the region. It should be noted that the intention of this paper is not to provide a detailed account of the various religions that Kashmir harbours; rather, the objective is to shed light on the manner in which ancient settlers generally propagated the universalist ideas of harmony, usually rendering the

distinction between Muslims and Hindus almost an impossible task. Naturally, it would be naïve to assume that such idealism has retained its stance in the inevitable face of human nature. Indeed, religious radicalization and decades of conflict have permanently harmed the notion of a peaceful, interreligious co-existence. As concluded in this paper, the narrative underlying Kashmiri identity has acquired strong religious tones, whereby the collective consciousness of being a Kashmiri Muslim or Pandit, rather than being a Kashmiri, now dominates the society. The glorious days of religious pluralism - once the landmark of Kashmiri history- are long gone.

Early History

In order to grasp the significance of religious plurality in the Kashmir Valley, it is necessary to briefly reconstruct the early history and fundamentals of the religious ideas existing before the advent of the Lohara kings. According to Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* and *Nilamatpurana*, the valley of Kashmir was once a big lake called Satisar - the lake of Sati (Hindu Goddess Durga). A ferocious demon, by the name Jalodbhava (or Jaldeo or Jaludhar), lived in the lake and misused his power to terrorise his surroundings. The great sage Kashyapa, the ward of this devil, practised penance for a long time. Feeling compassion for Kashyapa, the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva drained the water from the lake and Goddess Sharika dropped a pebble on the evil demon which immediately became a hillock and the demon was crushed under it and remained imprisoned. The land that emerged out of the lake came to be known as Kashmir.

There is agreement among historians that the history of Kashmir can be traced back to 250 B.C, when the region was conquered by Ashoka, who subsequently sent missionaries to introduce Buddhism in the land.¹ Buddhism was a significant part of the classical Kashmiri culture, as is often reflected in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, and further enjoyed patronage not solely of the Buddhist rulers, but of Hindu and early Muslims rulers as well. Kashmir became the centre of what came to be known as Sanskrit Buddhism; it was there that the Mahayana and also the Yogachara and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism developed and flourished. Before the end of the first millennium, Kashmiri teachers, monks, and scholars, had migrated all throughout Asia – including China, Tibet, Afghanistan, Japan, and Korea – spreading the *dhamma*, translating texts, and interpreting doctrines. Thus, it can be stated that the existence of Buddhism in Kashmir was instrumental in establishing Buddhist and Hindu colonies in Central Asia. It is interesting to note that prior and during Kalhana's existence, no evident distinction was made between Hindus and Buddhists in the Kashmir Valley. From the fifth century to approximately the twelfth century, Kashmir was characterized by Hindu

¹ Arya, Ajay Singh & Aakohoon, Sarveer Hussain. *Mughal Emperors and Kashmir: A Historical Study*. Jiwaji University (2017): 5

civilization and Shaivite culture. The tenth and eleventh centuries were marked by a spirit of religious activity: it was during this period that Kashmir Shaivism, with its particular humanistic philosophy and idealistic monism known as Trika, reached its highest development and produced teachers and writers of high calibre.² In Kashmir Shavism, “the core concept which is that Shiva is one, pure and invisible consciousness that manifests itself as the diversity of the phenomenal world through Shiva’s cosmic energy, Shakti”³. In Hindu mythology, Hindu rulers and culture played a significant role in the history of Kashmir.

The Age of the Loharas (1003-1171 A.D.) marks the zenith of early Medieval Hindu Kashmir, at a time when the rest of India was passing through a great upheaval at the hands of Muslim invaders. The early history of the dynasty was described in the *Rajatarangini*, and subsequent accounts which provide information up to and beyond the end of the dynasty come primarily from Jonaraja and Srivara. The Lohara Dynasty was founded in 1003 A.D. by Sangramaraja, from the Khasa tribe, who received the crown of Kashmir from his aunt, Queen Didda and is generally regarded as a period of shameless lust and pitiless misrule on the part of kings and queens. Especially later rulers of the dynasty were considered weak: internecine fighting and corruption were endemic during this period, with only brief spurts of respite, which would eventually pave way for the growth of Islamic rule in the region.

Islamic Rule

The first appearance of Islam in Kashmir is by some believed to have been on the occasion of the abortive invasion of Tartar Khan Dalcha in 1128 A.D.⁴ It was not, however, until two centuries later that Islamic culture crept into Kashmir at a gradual pace, ultimately modeling the religious demography of the region by becoming the dominant trend. The process by which Islam was introduced to the Valley was different from that whereby it entered other parts of Hindustan, for it came not by conquest, but by peaceful penetration. Historian Mohibbul Hasan ascribes this phenomenon to the internal decay of the Lohara Dynasty during which oppressive taxation, corruption, internecine fights and rise of feudal lords (*Damaras*) prevailed. The severe socio-economic and political deterioration of the Valley eventually helped pave way for the rapid and mass conversion to Islam.⁵

It is said that Renchen Shah, called Sadr-ud-Din (1325-27 CE) – a Buddhist prince from Ladakh who escaped to Kashmir due to unfavorable political conditions - established Islam in the

² Mohan, Krishna. *Kashmir Under the Loharas*. Thesis. School of Oriental and African Studies (1950): 2
<https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/29638/1/10752610.pdf>

³ S. Toshkhani and K. Warikoo. “Preface,” *Cultural Heritage of Kashmiri Pandits*, ed. S.S. Toshkhani and K. Warikoo (New Delhi, India: Pentagon Press, 2009), xii.

⁴ Walter, Harold Arnold. “Islam in Kashmir,” *The Muslim World* 4, no. 4 (1914): 340-351

⁵ Hasan, Mohibbul. *Kashmir Under the Sultans*. (New Delhi, India: Aakar Books, 2005): 32.

region. Renchen's spiritual unrest is chiefly attributed to the decision made on behalf of Brahamans, who would not admit him to their caste after he married the daughter of the last Hindu Rajah:

"No doubt a great diplomat and adventurer – considering those times – Rinchan, Buddhist that he was, failed to buy the status of a Brahman peacefully, although there existed very small difference between Buddhism and Brahamanism in Kashmir then. He was refused because tradition-bound, visionless and unaccommodating Brahman chief priest (Devaswami) would not get the caste 'polluted'"⁶

Thwarted with the discriminatory caste system, the Buddhist prince decided he would adopt the religion of the first person whom he would first see the following morning – whether it was by sheer accident or prearranged, he came into contact with Sayyid Sharafu'd-Din, commonly known as "Bulbul" Shah, who eventually oversaw Renchen's conversion to Islam.⁷ Subsequently, Renchen assumed the title of Sultan Sadr-ud-Din, thereby becoming the first of Kashmir's Muslim rulers. At the time when he embraced Islam, there were very few Muslims in Kashmir, but after his conversion their number rapidly increased, so that by the end of Zainul-Abidin's reign, a majority of the population of Kashmir had been converted to Islam.⁸ This was accomplished chiefly by the tireless efforts and zeal of Sufi saints from Persia and Central Asia, such as Bulbul Shah, who sought refuge in Kashmir from the Mongol holocaust and Timur's atrocities.

Another historical figure that played a pivotal role in the work of proselytization was Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, a Persian Sufi, who entered Kashmir with seven hundred of expeditioners in the reign of Sultan Qutub-ud-Din (1372-89). Hamadani had been observant of the manner in which the socio-political equilibrium of the Valley had been disturbed as a result of decades of Mongol invasion and lack of renovation vis-à-vis the economic system.⁹ He sought to revive the economic condition of Kashmir with the arrival of his followers, consisting of soldiers, craftsmen and artisans, who taught the Kashmiris in various fields such as carpet weaving, shawl weaving and paper mache. With improved socio-economic standards, Islam eventually became the religion of the masses with his efforts. It is worth noting that upon the arrival of the first Muslims in Kashmir, they were initially received in a friendly manner, although social intercourse between Hindus and Muslims was not entirely spared from feelings of scepticism:

⁶ Parnu, R.K. *A History of Muslim Rule in Kashmir 1320-1819*. (Srinagar, Kashmir: Gulshan Books: 2009): 79

⁷ Ibid, 39

⁸ Khan, Hasan Mohibul. "Some Aspects of Kashmir History under the Shah Mirs and the Chaks," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 16* (1953): 194-200.

⁹ Ahad, Abdul, "The Impact of Hazrat Sayyid Ali Hamadani on medieval Kashmir," *Shah-e-Hamadan Amir Kabir Sayyid Ali Hamadani* (A.H. 714-786), op. cit, 162

“It was only when Islam began to make rapid progress that it aroused the hostility of the Brahmans, who found their traditional values being upset, and some of the basic assumptions on which Hindu society was based being challenged. However, in the course of time, realizing the futility of opposition, they were compelled to adopt an attitude of tolerance and goodwill. These feelings were reciprocated by the Muslims.”¹⁰

Except for the communal clash that took place during Hasan Shah’s reign, the two communities lived for the most part peacefully and amicably throughout the Sultanate period, irrespective of their religious affiliations. Evidence suggests that social interactions between Muslims and Hindus were frequent in nature, with intermarriages occurring as a common phenomenon. But perhaps the most noteworthy manifestation of religious pluralism at the time was the relation between the mystic saint Lallehuri or Lal Ded (1329-1392) and her disciple, Sheikh Nur-ud-din (also referred to as Nund Rishi). Born into a Hindu Brahmin family, Lal Ded’s verses would go on to illustrate the union of the streams of Shaivite philosophy and Sufism in the fourteenth-century Kashmir.¹¹ The contribution of Lal Ded is of considerable importance - not only did she initiate a sacred mission as a member of a particular faith - her dedication to the cause of humanity as a whole and especially to offer comfort to the Kashmiris would define the plural and even shared cultural ethos in Kashmir. As Trisal notes:

“It is between the verses of Lal Ded and teachings of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din that the ethos of Kashmiri plural society lies. Their percepts, verses and sayings formed the core of Kashmiri culture... This gave rise to that peculiar social relationship, among Kashmiris belonging to different faiths, which can be termed as the basis of Kashmiri identity.”¹²

Apart from Lal Ded, the influence of her disciple, Nund Rishi, is generally seen as the reflection of the syncretism between the Hindu past and the Islamic present of the Valley. His teachings of equality and tolerance are revered equally by Hindus and Muslims. As a result of the Rishi tradition, Kashmiris reputedly practiced a form of tolerance and inclusivity called ‘Kashmiriness’; a notion which implied the respect for each other’s religious traditions and religious festivals. As later explained in this paper, this famous practice was re-named later ‘Kashmiriyat’, a term that owes its roots to Persian and Arabic.¹³

¹⁰ Hasan, Mohibbul. *Kashmir Under the Sultans*. (New Delhi, India: Aakar Books, 2005), 249.

¹¹ Chowdhary, Rekha. *Jammu and Kashmir: 1990 and Beyond: Competitive Politics in the Shadow of Separatism*. SAGE Series on Politics in Indian States, 2019.

¹² Tirsal 1996, 735-740. Quoted in Chowdhary, Rekha. *Jammu and Kashmir: 1990 and Beyond: Competitive Politics in the Shadow of Separatism*. (SAGE Series on Politics in Indian States, 2019).

¹³ Snedden, Christopher. *Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 29.

Naturally, the spread of Islam in Kashmir was not always a peaceful process. Although the rule of Shamas-ud-Din had witnessed an expansion of Muslim influence, Hindus and Buddhists continued to command Kashmiri politics to a great extent. It was only later in the fourteenth century that the liberal policy towards non-Muslims eroded during the rule of Sultan Sikander (1389-1413), also referred to as *Butshikan*, who was inherently opposed to the act of idol worship. As an iconoclast, Sikander's desire to eliminate all traces of Hinduism resulted in the persecution of Hindus, whereby thousands of worshippers escaped the Valley from massacre or forced conversions. Nevertheless, other Muslim successors did not entirely share Sikander's iconoclastic fervor. One of these was Sultan Sikander's son Shahi Khan - who embraced the title of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1423-1474)- who restored peace and confidence by his policy of generosity and religious tolerance.¹⁴ Under his peaceful rule, several Kashmiri Pandits, who had earlier left the Valley in fear of forced conversion, were able to return. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin was known to his subjects as *Bud Shah* (Great King) and sometimes referred to as *Bhatt Shah* (Pandit's King) by Kashmiri Pandits, as in local Kashmiri language, Kashmiri Pandits are also referred to as Bhatt'e. The following period witnessed the reconstruction of Hindu temples and continuation of festivities, thereby restoring elements of interreligious harmony in the region.

In 1540, the Mughal governor of Kashgar conquered Kashmir, and ruled the region until 1551 when he was killed in an outbreak of revolt by Chaks. This marked the beginning of the reign of Chaks who are believed to have been naturalised Kashmiris of Dardic ancestry from Chilas (Today; Gilgit Baltistan). As Shias, the Chak rulers persecuted their Sunni subjects, causing scholars of the latter faith to flee to safer environs. The feeble attempts of Yusuf Shah Chak and the inexperience of Yaqub Shah Chak to mobilise the energetic elements in the Chak nobility to serve the ends of the Sultanate led to Kashmir's passing into the Mughal hands. The attempts of Kashmiris to reassert independence subsequent to 1586 were foredoomed to failure due to lack of resources with which to fight the mighty Mughal Empire.

Kashmir under Mughals

Kashmir did not witness direct Mughal rule until the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great (1555-1605), whose aggressive endeavours to annex Kashmir were prompted both by imperialistic designs and considerations of the defence of the Mughal Empire (which was increasingly menaced by the growing Uzbek Empire). Despite tough resistance, Akbar succeeded in invading the Valley, wherefore Kashmiri historians often perceive the Mughal rule as the beginning of the end of Kashmiri independence. The successful nature of Akbar's invasion is often attributed to the internal Sunni-Shia divisions which prevailed in Kashmir at

¹⁴ Bhat, Jawahar Lal. *Lal-Ded Revisited*. (Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir: Vision Creative Services, 2014): 27.

the time.¹⁵ Anti-Shia policies of Mirza Haidar Dughlat and the anti-Sunni policies of the Chaks had shattered what was left of Kashmiri unity, wherefore occupation of the region proved an easy task for the Mughals.

The Mughal conquest of Kashmir in 1586 is widely considered as a turning point in the social, economic, political, and cultural history of the region. Substantial changes occurred in political and administrative institutions, and the socio-economic set-up underwent a drastic change.¹⁶ Industrial growth took a different shape and in the course of time shawl-weaving became a leading industry which would eventually revolutionize the economy of the Valley. During the rule of successive Mughal emperors, picturesque gardens and mosques were constructed, and the Valley gradually evolved into a resort for royalty, nobility and aristocracy. Some additional benefits included the construction of several religious structures and the abolition of taxes imposed by Muslim monarchs upon Hindu subjects:

“Both Zainul Abidin and Akbar treated them [Kashmiri Pandits] with kindness, allowing them to practise their religion and customs freely and without fear, and rehabilitated them and offered them trusted positions in administration. Akbar repealed punitive taxes like jizya which was earlier reduced by Zainul Abidin.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, these interludes of relative harmony and egalitarian treatment vis-à-vis Kashmiris would prove to be brief. In the time of the later Mughals, particularly during the reign of Muhi-ud-Din Muhammad, commonly known by the sobriquet Aurangzeb, things for Kashmiris touched a low ebb. Famous for his intolerance of other religions, Aurangzeb re-imposed the *jizya* and his governors adopted tyrannical methods to deal with the Kashmiri Pandits and Shia Muslims. The end of his rule and the war of succession between his three sons following his death in 1707 led to a steady decline of Mughal rule in Kashmir.¹⁸

Kashmir under Afghans

In the last decades of the 17th century during the reign of Aurangzeb, the Mughal empire had started to decline. During his tyrannical rule, the discontent among Kashmiris had reached its peak: the grievances of the Kashmiris caused by the disastrous famine of 1733 had been met

¹⁵ Snedden, Christopher. *Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 29.

¹⁶ Ahmad, Sarveer., Mir, Muzafar Ahmad., & Dar, Arif Ahmad. “Socio-cultural impact of Mughal rule on Kashmir,” *International Journal of Scientific Development and Research 2*, no. 5 (2017): 202- 205.
<http://www.ijedr.org/papers/IJEDR1705034.pdf>

¹⁷ .S. Toshkhani and K. Warikoo. “Preface,” *Cultural Heritage of Kashmiri Pandits*, ed. S.S. Toshkhani and K. Warikoo (New Delhi, India: Pentagon Press, 2009), xix.

¹⁸ Schofield, Victoria. *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War*. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2003): 4.

with non-existent aid-efforts by the Mughal central administration.¹⁹ After his death in 1707, ambitious regional chieftains consolidated power in their respective territories and the links with the central Mughal command began to weaken. Northern India was a sea of chaos, whereby the misrule by the Mughal satraps made it possible for Ahmad Shah Abdali, the founder of the Durrani empire in Afghanistan, to consolidate power in Kashmir in 1751. The emergence of Afghans on the political forefront of Kashmir in the middle of the 18th century was the result of local leaders Muquim Kanth and Zhir Didamari inducing Ahmad Shah Abdali to invade Kashmir.²⁰ While the people of the Valley attempted to relieve themselves from the screws of Mughal oppression, their wish for a remedy to their problems was met with an increase of miseries upon the arrival of Afghans.

According to historical accounts, the Afghans were brutally repressive with all Kashmiris, regardless of class or religion. Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits alike were relegated to a subservient position and brutally oppressed by the Afghans. Regarding the miscalculation on part of the Kashmiris in inviting Afghans to rule Kashmir, Prithivi Nath Kaul Bamzai, a Kashmiri scholar, writes:

“Their [Afghan’s] rule reduced the Valley to the lowest depths of penury, degradation and slavery. While inviting the Afghans to take over the administration of the Valley, the Kashmiri nobles had mistaken them for a branch of the civilised and humane Mughal emperors of India. (...) Little did they imagine that all the beauty and nobility, for which Kashmir and its people were famous, would be wiped off under their rule.”²¹

Yet, many historians agree that Kashmiri Pandits were treated with the utmost cruelty; a reign of terror was let loose against those of Hindu faith, resulting in discriminatory practises, mass imprisonments and, even killings. In regards to Kashmiri identity under the tyrannical rule of the Afghans, Chitralkha Zutshi, Professor of History at The College of William & Mary, Virginia, contends that “[A]rticulations of Kashmiri regional belonging that included and transcended religious, tribal and other local affiliations became particularly insistent”²², whereby both Muslims and Pandits increasingly turned to poetry in order to express a sense of belonging to their homeland. Nevertheless, almost six decades of policies of Afghan *subadars* adversely affected the economic life of Kashmiris, but further inflicted sectarian and communal tensions in the society. Zaheen, Research Scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University, argues that during

¹⁹ Zutshi, Chitralkha. *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*. (Oxford University Press, 2004): 34

²⁰ S.S. Toshkhani and K. Warikoo. “Preface,” *Cultural Heritage of Kashmiri Pandits*, ed. S.S. Toshkhani and K. Warikoo (New Delhi, India: Pentagon Press, 2009), xix.

²¹ Raina, Maharaj. *Afghan Rule in Kashmir*. Online, <https://ikashmir.net/mkraina/6.html>

²² Zutshi, Chitralkha. *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*. (Oxford University Press, 2004): 34

the Afghan rule, Kashmir witnessed a religious shift between different Muslims and Pandits, and the widening of the sectarian discord between *Sunnis* and *Shias*.²³ Tired of relentless persecution by Afghans, Mirza Pandit Dhar and his son Birbal Dhar secretly persuaded Maharaja Ranjit Singh to annex Kashmir, who finally succeeded in 1819.

Sikh Rule in Kashmir

In 1819, Kashmir was annexed by Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh's forces, thus ending Afghan rule and more than four centuries of Muslim rule in the Valley. As was customary practice under the rule of Mughals and Afghans, control of Kashmir was orchestrated by a series of governors. While the Sikh rulers were generally tolerant towards different faiths, they established a specifically "Hindu" tone to their rule, eventually setting stage for the Dogra dynasty which began ruling Kashmir in 1846. Several policies, which demonstrated the assertion of Hindu belief over that of the Muslims, were enacted. This included the ban on slaughter of sacred cattle, closing down the Jamia Masjid in Srinagar, banning the *azaan* prayers, were considered "pro-Hindu" in nature, although the true motives behind such acts remain debated among historians. Chitrlekha Zutshi contends that the emphasis on asserting Hindu and Sikh beliefs "was a part of an attempt to articulate a Sikh identity separate and distinct from that of the Mughals".²⁴ On the other hand, the treatment of Muslims under Sikh rule was documented by several European travellers, who witnessed the abject poverty of the Muslim peasantry and the exorbitant taxes under the Sikhs. William Moorcroft, who travelled throughout Kashmir on his way to Bokhara, recalls his experiences in Srinagar:

*"Everywhere the people were in the most abject condition, exorbitantly taxed by the Sikh Government and subjected to every kind of extortion and oppression by its officers. The consequences of this system are the gradual depopulation of the country."*²⁵

Explaining the reasons for Maharaja Ranjit Singh's neglect of the Valley, Godfrey Vigne, who visited the Valley in the late 1830's, says:

"Ranjit assuredly well knew that the greater the prosperity of Kashmir, the greater would be the inducement to invasion by the East India Company ... and most assuredly its [Kashmir's] ruin has been accelerated, not less by his rapacity than by

²³ Zaheen. "Kashmir under the Afghans (1752-1819)," *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies* 4, no. 1 (2016): 21-28. (27)

²⁴ Zutshi, Chitrlekha. *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*. (Oxford University Press, 2004): 40

²⁵ Ibid.

his political jealousy, which suggested to him, at any cost, the merciless removal of its wealth.”²⁶

Indeed, the cruel treatment of Kashmiri Muslims would prove to be pivotal in the later times. While Kashmiris unquestionably endured a lesser harsh treatment under the Sikhs than the Afghans, the “pro-Hindu” policies would ultimately result in resentment based on religious lines.

Creation of the State and Dogra Rule

The State of Jammu and Kashmir came into existence at the end of the First Sikh War in 1846, when, as a result of the Treaty of Amritsar and Lahore, the British transferred the Kashmir Valley and its contiguous regions to the Dogra King Maharaja Gulab Singh. In return for this favour, the British would receive a substantial financial sum from the Maharaja of Jammu, thereby demarking an agreement which existed exclusively between the former and latter parties, thereby fully undermining the interest of Kashmiris. Christopher Thomas contends that *“the people never asked for it, never wanted it, and never loved it.”²⁷*

Although the Dogra dynasty is credited with the creation of the modern Princely State of Jammu & Kashmir, which eventually would become the bone of contention between India, Pakistan and China, the beginning of the Dogra period was characterized by anguish and resentment, notably as a result of the favourable treatment enjoyed by Kashmiri Hindus and the lack thereof among Kashmiri Muslims. Important and respected posts in society were chiefly assigned to Kashmiri Pandits whereas a significant part of the marginalized Muslim population led a life of poverty, subjugation and exploitation. For the Muslim peasantry, in particular, the hundred-year reign of the monarchy appointed as subcontractors of the Raj was an unmitigated disaster.²⁸ In the words of Walter Lawrence:

“When I first came to Kashmir in 1889, I found the people sullen, desperate and suspicious. They had been taught for many years that they were serfs without any rights ... Pages might be written by me on facts which have come under my personal observation, but it will suffice to say that the system of administration had degraded the people and taken all heart out of them.”

²⁶ G.T. Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Isardo, the countries adjoining the mountain-course of the Indus, and the Himalaya, north of the Punjab*, vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn, 1842): 318.

²⁷ Thomas, Christopher. *Faultline Kashmir*. (Michigan: Brunel Academic Publishers, 2000): 17

²⁸ Bose, Sumantara. *Transforming India*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013): 233-234.

Lawrence observed that the peasants notably attributed their miseries to the deputies, through which the Maharajas ruled, who were unwilling to reveal the real condition of the people to their master.²⁹ These deputies belonged notably to the Kashmiri Pandit community. The socio-economic disparity between the two communities would prove to be of paramount importance in the establishment of religion as a significant component of identity:

“The early Dogra period is critical for an understanding of the development of identities in the Kashmir Valley, since it set the stage for a transformation within the public discourse of the Valley, from an emphasis on regional identities to a privileging of the religious component of identities.”³⁰

The absence of concern vis-à-vis the interests of the majority Muslim population resulted in the creation of ethno-religious identity consciousness among the masses. This would further exacerbate the existing tensions between Muslims and Pandits, as evidenced in the later stages of the post-Partition era.

Post-1947

Despite the political differences between Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits, notably the result of the 1931 Riots, the two communities were culturally bonded and lived a relatively mixed life in the post-1947 period.³¹ As Mahatma Gandhi observed during communal riots in India during Partition:

“...It is really difficult for me to distinguish between a Hindu Kashmiri and a Muslim Kashmiri. You people speak one language and have one culture. While the rest of the country burns in communal fire, I see a ray of hope in Kashmir only...”

Mutual trust largely prevailed, and the absence of major incidents failed to ignite the flames of communal tension. Moreover, it was at this time that forces of nationalism in the region were rekindled, chiefly by Sheikh Abdullah, the first elected Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, considered by many as the father of Kashmiri nationalism.³² Abdullah pushed forward the idea of ‘Kashmiriyat’ which emphasized the unique history of the Kashmiri people, and the historical harmony which had traditionally existed between different religions

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Zutshi, Chitralekha. *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*. (Oxford University Press, 2004): 16

³¹ Chowdhary, Rekha. *Jammu and Kashmir: 1990 and Beyond: Competitive Politics in the Shadow of Separatism*. SAGE Series on Politics in Indian States, 2019.

³² Arakotaram, Karan. “The Rise of Kashmiriyat: People-Building in 20th Century Kashmir,” *The Columbia Undergraduate Journal of South Asian Studies* 1, no.1 (2009): 26-40.

and ethnicities in the Valley. Yet, initially Abdullah's fight for independence and later on for greater autonomy for the Kashmiri people fell on deaf ears of New Delhi; his requests were essentially ignored by Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of India. Upon Abdullah's imprisonment, discontent among Kashmiri youth was becoming increasingly unmistakable, ultimately resulting in sporadic violence as exemplified by the riots in 1955 and 1957. Later on, Sheikh Abdullah announced in 1972, "*our dispute with Government of India is not about accession but is about the quantum of autonomy*".

A turning point in the history of Kashmir, which undoubtedly contributed to the disillusionment of Kashmiri youth, were the 1987 Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly elections. Farooq Abdullah, son of Sheikh Abdullah, was reappointed as the Chief Minister, although the election was widely perceived to have been rigged. While many Kashmiri youth participated in elections with great enthusiasm, the poll results ignited sentiments of anger and violence, eventually contributing to the outbreak of violence in 1989.

However, well before the elections of 1987, Pakistan had formulated the policy of *Operation Topac* in 1984, a brainchild of President Zia-ul-Haq which enabled the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) in Pakistan to start an armed movement with the alleged support of Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir. *Operation Topac* had a three-phase action plan for covert support to armed insurgency in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir. Under the first phase, youth from Jammu & Kashmir were to cross the de facto border (Line of Control – LoC) to seek weapon training at various training camps in Pakistan Administered Jammu & Kashmir. During the second phase, called '*Operation Stage*', the Pak-trained youth were expected to indulge in large scale subversive activities, like bomb blasts and shoot-outs, creating an atmosphere of terror and demoralizing the administration. The third phase, which was supposed to be the final stage of the operation, was to liberate the Muslim majority in the Kashmir Valley and establish an independent Islamic State. The abundance of *Mujahideen* fighters in Afghanistan post the Soviet-Afghan war, formulation of Operation Topac, operations of JKLF in Pakistan and United Kingdom (UK), elections of 1987 in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir and some political decisions of Farooq Abdullah preceded the beginning of terrorism in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir. The Kashmiri youth were brainwashed and weapon-trained to indulge in large scale subversive activities, and succeeded in creating an atmosphere of terror in the Kashmir Valley and forging divisions in the name of religion, thereby blurring the ethno-religious identity of Kashmir.

Although the start of militancy could be interpreted as having had some roots in political ideologies and motives, the narrative of the insurgency quickly acquired religious tones and in essence turned out to be a proxy-war of the military establishment of Pakistan. This included the creation of Hizbul Mujahideen, Hizbollah and later on the dreaded and Pan-

Islamist Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), supported by the Pakistani Intelligence Agency, ISI, and its infiltration into Indian-administered Jammu & Kashmir in order to first undermine the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which initially, and ostensibly maintained a secular pro-independence stance. Opposing the JKLF's seemingly and bodged nationalist agenda, Hizbul Mujahideen began systematically targeting pro-independence intelligentsia with leanings to the former outfit. Disenchanted by the Jihadi sentiments imposed by Hizbul Mujahideen, Kashmiri youth would ultimately model the objective of the insurgency into a religious one, au lieu of the initial ostensible nationalist agenda. This religious prejudice was clearly manifested in the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in 1990, which has permanently undermined the level of trust between the two communities. Like previous instances in history, for Pakistani infiltrators from across the border and militant Kashmiri youth who had gone to Pakistan for training, religion was merely a tool to exploit the vulnerabilities of the masses and tear apart the socio-cultural fabric of Hindu-Muslim unity.

In the contemporary era, religious radicalization and terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir have extinguished the memories of communal warmth and tolerance. A closer glance points to a sudden heave in Pan-Islamism in Kashmir's Muslim society, in which violence and discrimination take place in the name of religion. Moreover, Kashmiri identity has been infiltrated with strong religious lines, whereby the early history of peaceful co-existence has been overshadowed by the collective consciousness of being a Kashmiri Muslim or Pandit, rather than being a Kashmiri, now dominates the society. Subsequently because of rising notions of Pan-Islamism, in today's society of Kashmir, it has now also become important what kind of a Muslim one is.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly traced the history of religious plurality of the Kashmir Valley, attempting to delineate the genesis of religious pluralism in the region. Indeed, a gaze at the early history of Kashmir reveals how some ancient settlers generally propagated the universalist ideas of harmony, rendering the distinction between Muslims and Hindus almost an impossible task. Nevertheless, a quick glance over the rich history of Kashmir undoubtedly raises concerns – what has caused Kashmir to catapult from being the bastion of religious plurality into a battleground of religious tension and radicalism?

Kashmir's ethnic and religious diversity, once the hallmark of its local pluralism, has evolved into the stage for a wider set of adversarial contests between India and Pakistan. Many locals, irrespective of their religious affiliations, have been caught in the middle – victims of national militaries, terrorists, or both. In the course of time, nevertheless, wider trends toward

religious nationalism, religious fanaticism and Pan-Islamism, cross-border terrorism under the patronage of the Pakistani military establishment, and some actions and inactions by the Indian government in response, may have driven many members of religious communities to align themselves with one side or the other, eroding confidence and communication across religious lines. Indeed, the Kashmir dispute has become inherently imbued with notions of religious identity, but it is crucial to comprehend that the core of the post-partition conflict was not rooted in questions for or against any faith.

What was traditionally a strong confluence between Islam and Hinduism in Kashmir, where the shared language and culture worked as the greatest bond between the two communities, has evolved into mounting pressure that has targeted communities of Kashmiris for their non-conformist ways in accepting religious practices. Whereas Muslim Sufi saints preached pluralism and tolerance of other faiths, the novel type of political Islam grappling Kashmir has instilled sentiments of intolerance and prejudice. At a societal level, the outbursts of violence, radicalization, and terrorism that have taken place in the course of the past decades, have undoubtedly led to the transformation of relationships among Muslims and Pandits. The mere thought of interreligious communities in Jammu and Kashmir is but a utopian dream.

Perhaps the main casualty in the conflict has been none other than religious plurality itself, which today remains a distant memory in the history of Kashmir.



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