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Ethnic Conflict: A Study of Kashmir

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Abstract:

The Kashmiris in J&K is experiencing the worst kind of violence since 1989 as Muslim majority in the state wanted to exercise its right of self-determination. And some of the people and their organization pleaded for independence and separation from the Indian federation. Since the eruption of militancy much had changed in the state of J&K. In fact there is hardly any aspect of life that has not been affected by this long turmoil. The present article aims to examine the various factors responsible for the rise of ethnic conflict in Kashmir and the responses of central government from time to time that varies from coercive to political.

Keywords: *Autonomy, conflict, ethnic, fundamentalist, identity, religion, self determination, violence*

1. Introduction

Kashmir holds a pivotal position in the state and the major concentration of people Kashmiris lies in the valley of Kashmir.¹ Kashmiris are also inhabited in Kishtwar, Bhaderwah and Ramban areas of the Jammu region. Kashmiri is a wide term which has been used for several streams of immigrants mainly from Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan. On Kashmiris, however, there is a close influence of the Indo- Aryan race. They have also received racial impulses from Indo-Greeks which have influenced the race structure of the people considerably. Sanskrit language has great influence on the life of Kashmiri and most of the Muslims have converted from Hinduism. They are now residing in almost all parts of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.² The most complex problem that India is facing today is the problem of Kashmiris. For almost last 60 years Kashmir has been plagued with ethnic conflict but last two decades it witnessed violence and terrorism of all sorts and dimensions, causing irreparable damage to the institutions and development of Kashmir. The focus of this study has been why the demand for autonomy and self determination in Kashmir turned violent and what endogenous and exogenous factors are responsible of such type of situation?

2. Factors Responsible For The Rise Of Ethnic Conflict In Kashmir

The ethnic conflict in Kashmir has a long historical background. The geography of Kashmir along with its history, culture and traditional values made it a distinct entity. Kashmir was originally called a land 'Satisar' according to Rajtarangini of Kalhana where Goddess Parvati lived.³ However, Kashmir for a long time has been under the foreign rule- Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs and Dogras. The Mughals rule in valley lasted more than a century and a half and Kashmir was ruled by Afghans or Pathans about 75 years.⁴ In 1819 Kashmir was invaded by Sikh Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab who ruled over Kashmir near about 25 years. It was in 1846 that Kashmir passed into the hands of Dogra rulers of Jammu till 1947.⁵

Kashmir maintained its distinct identity despite rule and oppression by autocratic rulers. The ethnic problem of Kashmir is rooted in its history and has a colonial past.⁶ From the history, it is obvious that a very few rulers cared for the people of Kashmir and they lived in subjugation and poverty. The rulers used to run away in times of trouble or invasion by external forces. The rulers denied their subjects, civic and other fundamental rights and they were treated badly. Their participation in economic activities was limited. Their right on their own land was at the mercy of their tyrant rulers. The outsider control for a long period has left in the minds of Kashmiris a memory of subjugation and economic oppression of the community. In order to get rid of the atrocities and hardships perpetrated and inflicted on them, they rose in revolts from time to time against their despotic rulers. They had to face suppression and repression instead of emancipation.⁷ During the 1930s and 1940s this memory has been sharpened by a political discourse against the Dogra rulers.

In the preliminary period of political consciousness, religion played an important role and there has been a claim of Muslim identity. The ethno- cultural identity of Kashmiri masses may be constructed to have both cognitive as well as theoretical basis. In the cognitive terms, it gets reflected in the societal and cultural factors that make Kashmiris a distinct group, their language, customs and traditions etc. In theoretical terms, it is represented in the philosophy governing the vital aspects of Kashmiri life. The three great religious traditions namely Buddhism, Shavism and Islam have influenced the philosophical orientation of the people of Kashmir.

But ethno- cultural identity has always remained primary in Kashmir.⁸ The early expression of Muslim identity was a result of insensitivity of the Dogra regime towards the socio-economic aspirations of the Kashmiri people. In 1931 the political consciousness took the shape of political movement commonly known as the freedom movement of Kashmir. This revolt helped

the Kashmiri people rise above their Muslims identity in the subsequent years.⁹ In 1932 Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah founded a political party, the All J&K Muslim Conference. This party was an early response of the emerging Muslim intelligentsia of Kashmir to the situation of the valley's backwardness and deprivation. At the turn of the 20th century the condition of the Kashmir was quite pitiable. There were lots of hardships faced by them and heavy burden was imposed by a very oppressive system of taxation.¹⁰

When the British colonial power left the Indian subcontinent in August 1947, they decided to create two separate states—India and Pakistan. During India's partition, Kashmir had two choices either to join with India or with Pakistan. Maharaja Hari Singh, the Hindu Dogra ruler, did not want to join any of the two dominions. He sought Standstill Agreement from both India and Pakistan.¹¹ But, on October 22, 1947, a large number of armed tribesmen from North West Pakistan invaded Kashmir destroying and looting towns and villages. To save Kashmir, Maharaja Hari Singh appealed to India for military aid which was accepted by the then Governor General Lord Mountbatten on October 27, 1947. The ruler of Kashmir decided to accede to secular India even though about 75% of his people were Muslims and signed an Instrument of Accession.¹² The most important fact was that the Muslim leadership of Kashmir sided with India and opposed all Pakistan claims on Kashmir. The Kashmir leader Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah aimed at securing maximum autonomy for his people within secular Indian federation.¹³ He had faith in Indian Leadership. The basis of the faith was the sensitivity shown by Indian leadership towards the urge of the people of Kashmir to maintain their distinctive political identity. They were given a constitutionally granted special status under Article 370¹⁴ within the federal structure of India in response to their demand for autonomy and also provided a substantial financial subsidy to facilitate the economic development of Kashmir.¹⁵ The state was to be governed by its own constitution. It was in accordance with the special status that the logic of state's relation with India was defined by a limited applicability of Indian constitution and a restricted jurisdiction of the Union Parliament within the scope of Instrument of Accession and Delhi Agreement of 1952.¹⁶ Sheikh Abdullah who had played a key role in keeping Kashmir with India was, however, imprisoned by the Indian government in 1953 following certain differences.¹⁷ This was an important event marked in the political history of the Jammu and Kashmir.

Congress Party leaders established close relationship with the leaders of NC and sought to control political power in the state by promoting and patronizing those leaders whose dependence on centre was necessary for political survival.²⁰ Once Indira Gandhi had established her supremacy in the national politics, she extended her interventionist policy in Kashmir too. During her rule, she employed the communal card in Kashmir to divide the region and encouraged the Jammu region of the state to challenge the Muslim leadership of Kashmir valley as they had feelings of neglect and discrimination. Congress also attempted to foment religious extremism by propping up the Jamaat-i-Islami in the Kashmir valley in order to undercut the support base of the secular and moderate NC. In 1974 Indira Gandhi released Sheikh Abdullah from jail. He contested the process of constitutional integration and raised the issue of autonomy while negotiating for his return to power. In 1975 Indira Gandhi reached an Accord with Sheikh Abdullah, under which he accepted the finality of Kashmir's accession to India, while the centre agreed to retain Article 370. Sheikh Abdullah was appointed the Chief Minister of the state.²¹ The Accord had a big impact in the valley. The separatist elements got isolated. In order to share power with it, the congress government again pressurized the NC government but it did not succeed. However, the reversal from the policy of Accord with Sheikh Abdullah was again a turning point and the forces of separatism and fundamentalism had made full use of the situation.²²

Despite increasing tension between his party and Congress, Sheikh Abdullah remained as Chief Minister of the state until his death in 1982. Before his death, he appointed Farooq Abdullah as President of NC party. The election of 1983 in state turned out to be very important. The 1983 election brought out rivalry between the NC and Congress and NC demanded the restoration of the pre-1953 autonomy. Farooq Abdullah campaigned as an anti-Congress and anti-Delhi man. He caught the mind's eye of Kashmir's Muslim majority. He laid emphasis on regional autonomy for Kashmir but his demands were not the same as that of the secessionist leaders.²³ Congress did not accept the verdict and barely a year after the Assembly election, Farooq Abdullah had to face the consequence of his opposition to the Congress and he was dismissed in 1984. G.M Shah was asked to form the government.²⁴ The dismissal of Farooq Abdullah, democratically elected leader, created such a situation which resulted in mass upsurge. This was another important point in the history of Kashmir and it led to mass discontentment and protest. It created a psychological impact on the minds of Kashmiris, which got manifested in the form of acute alienation and violence within a couple of years. For Kashmiris dismissal of Farooq and imposition of minority government on the people had the effect of sharpening their sense of political deprivation. It heightened their identity crisis. This incident for many had deeper meaning as they compared the situation of 1984 dismissal of Farooq Abdullah with that of dismissal and arrest of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953. The dismissal of Farooq turning out to be a critical point. Therefore, they believed that these incidents were evidence enough to argue that the Kashmiris were not provided democratic avenues as the centre acted in an intrusive manner. This followed with the large scale demonstrations, bandhs and strikes. People regarded it as an act to 'undermine Kashmir identity'²⁵

On the whole, people in Kashmir have a perception that there is absence of interactive politics in Kashmir. Kashmiris also argue that there is hardly any industrial growth or economic opportunities for Kashmiris as they are being deliberately neglected or discriminated by the central government. The only source of income is tourism. The Kashmiri language and culture have been allowed to atrophy. Kashmiris have complained that their identity is almost unique in India and they despite the democratic set up have never been allowed to have fair and free elections since independence. Kashmiris blamed government of India in general and Congress party in particular for sidelining their interest and welfare.²⁶ In Kashmir, secessionist sentiments among the Muslims gained ground in late 1980's. Educated but frustrated Muslim youth started resorting to violence against the state.

In Kashmir, the main exponent for the creation of an independent state of Kashmir was Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). It had evoked the spirit of Kashmiriat as the corner stone of Kashmiri nationalism. With the rise of Islamic fundamentalist groups such as the Harqat-UI-Ansar, and Hizbul Mujahideen, religious nationalism in Kashmir has staged a tremendous come back and gained popularity. Even these Islamic fundamentalist groups have carried out political assassinations of Kashmiri Muslim

leaders who were deemed as 'soft' on India.²⁷ In 1986 the worst communal disturbances took place. Shah's ministry was dismissed on the same ground as Farooq's dismissal during his regime.²⁸ The Governor rule was imposed in the state followed by the President's rule in 1986. In the meantime, Rajiv Gandhi came to power at the centre and restored the relation with NC by reaching an Accord with Farooq in 1986. Farooq Abdullah had formed an electoral alliance with the same Congress party that was responsible for his removal earlier. Both the parties agreed to fight the 1987 Assembly election jointly.²⁹ This alliance undermined Farooq Abdullah and his legitimacy to represent the distinctive Kashmiri sentiments and the identity urges of the people there. In other words, it blocked the normal and moderate channels of expression of Kashmiri sentiments.

It paved the way for extremist's forces to replace them as vanguards of the people in Kashmir and their interests in the state.³⁰ NC lost the people faith. However, opposition to both parties had grown considerably. It created a political vacuum in the valley which unfortunately was exploited by the extremist and fundamental forces. A large number of Muslims opposition groups come together in an umbrella organization known as Muslim United Front (MUF) who mobilized the urban youth and became popular. The mobilized and angry youth were confronted by the security forces. Most of them went across the border to be trained as militants and returned with arms. The political events between 1953 to 1987 became the basis of discontent among the people of Kashmir. Central government played a role in appointing or removing the government in the state in accordance to its own choice and convenience.³¹ Kashmiri Muslims separatist uprising in the popular media date its formal onset to a series of anti government demonstrations, strikes and sporadic violent attacks, at scattered locations in the late 80s in the valley of Kashmir. These incidents developed into a major political confrontation between the central government and the secessionist and separatist elements.

The candidates who had acted as election agents in 1987 election got determined to fight for their rights differently. Most of them decided to give up electoral struggle and instead took to violence. The state authorities proved to increasingly incapable of dealing with a variety of demands of political parties and militants outfits such as JKLF.³² The crises worsened with the kidnapping of Rubaiya Sayeed in December 1989, the daughter of then Home Affairs Minister, Mufti Mohd. Sayeed. This confrontation ended when the central government freed five detained hard core militants in exchange for the minister's daughter.³³ Since 1989 onwards the situation in valley deteriorated from bad to worse with bloody clashes between Indian para military troops and the militants becoming daily affair in Kashmir. The unrest spread to entire state with the state's placement under Governor's rule following dissolution of the elected state Assembly. At this, thousands of alienated Kashmiri youth revolted against India and killed innocent people.³⁴ During this period of crises, numbers of militants groups emerged in the valley, the most among them have been Hizbul Mujahideen, Laskar-e-Toiba and Jas-e-Mohd. All these militant organizations operating in the valley had been sponsored by Pakistan.³⁵

These Islamic fundamentalists groups have resorted to violence against the Hindus and the Buddhists.³⁶ With the assassination of Lasa Kaul, the Pandit Head of Kashmiris in the state and many others led to widespread panic within the Pandit community. In late 1989-90, the Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave their ancestral homes due to increasing violence in the valley. Since 1989 more than 1,00,000 Pandits migrated in camps in Jammu and other parts of the country. Their mass exodus from the valley had the impact of homogenizing the Kashmiri society. In fact, there is hardly any family which has not been touched by violence in one or the other way. In 1990 central rule was imposed with the dismissal of Farooq Abdullah. It did so in a situation wherein militants outfits were active in specific parts of the state. India alleged that Pakistan is playing a major role in Kashmir crises and pouring money, arms and mercenaries into the valley. Since the eruption of militancy much had changed in the state of J&K. In fact, there is hardly any aspect of life that has not been affected by this long turmoil. Years of violence and bloodshed have brought radical socio-economic, religious and behavioural changes in the society.³⁷ In growing militancy and violence, militants and security forces often confronted each other.

Human rights abuses occurred from both sides i.e security forces and the militants and such abuses further alienated the population. Consequently, Kashmir was engulfed by serious legitimacy crises. However, by 1996 the situation was sufficiently under control for the central government to hold Parliamentary bye election in the state. Efforts were made to persuade the major political party, the NC to contest the elections, but the NC stayed out of the contest. They demanded the restoration of full autonomy on the basis of the 1952 agreement as a condition for participation.

The Parliamentary election paved the way for holding state Assembly elections after a lapse of nine years. NC entered in the state Assembly election in order to strengthen its political base. Farooq Abdullah, the leader of NC asserted, "we are a part of India. It is only with India that we will progress and our Kashmiriyat will survive".³⁸

After a long and painful process of adjustment involving both coercion and reform, J&K held its first state election in 1996 since the crises of 1989. The 1996 elections renewed the political process and restored power to Kashmiri leaders.³⁹

3. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that Kashmir problem has stalked the political life in India since the advent of 1947. The circumstances which led to the accession of J&K to India were very extraordinary. The relationship between the centre and the state did not work out well. The relationship was based on Art. 370 of the constitution of India providing special status to the state. The accession of the state to the Indian Union in 1947 and special status guaranteed by the constitution in Art. 370 have not solved the problem. Kashmiri Muslims have serious objections to interventionist policies of the central Government and leadership. The discontent among the Kashmiris was so high, it erupted in large scale violence and thousands of innocent people have been killed and many were forced to leave their homes. After the escalation of violence, tourism in Kashmir declined that had negatively impacted the development of the state. Moreover, J&K is not an industrially developed state. Due to this, unemployment among educated has been steadily increasing. Unemployment among the youth makes militancy an attractive proposition.

Besides, the internal factors, J&K being a border state is affected by external factors also which further complicated the crisis of ethnic identity and made it violent. It has been cross border terrorism in J&K state because of which the situation gets

complicated. The religion distinctiveness have been used to project J&K state as a separate nation by communalizing the whole issue by showing sympathy and affinity to the Kashmiri brethren.

To check the violence, besides the military, New Delhi had restarted the political process and successful conduct of elections in 1996, 2002 and 2008 restored the democratic government in J&K.

Despite its various efforts different central governments have failed to reconcile, accommodate and aspirations of the people of Kashmir. As already proved, coercive methods and financial packages alone have their limitations. So objective, sincere, non-partisan and democratic approach can help to find out a durable solution to the ethnic problem of Kashmir.

Though the situation of Kashmir is nearly normal and peaceful, yet the cross border terrorism and demand of self determination are still alive.

4. Notes & References

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¹⁶ In Delhi Agreement India agreed to give a special position and status to Kashmir in the constitution whereby complete internal autonomy was assured to the state. The Hereditary ruler would be replaced by a Head of the state who would be elected for a term of five years. Fundamental rights that are guaranteed by the Indian constitution were to apply to Kashmir subject to the provision that they would not encroach upon the programme of land reform. The Jurisdiction of the Supreme Court was to be limited, as regards Kashmir to inter- state disputes, fundamental rights and to matter of defence, foreign affairs and communications. The emergency powers of the President of India were to apply in Kashmir only at the request of and with the concurrence of the government of the state. For details see the Text of Delhi Agreement 1952, in A.S. Anand, *The Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir: Its Developments and Comments (IInd Edition)*, New Delhi, Universal, 1995, pp. 149-152.

¹⁷ The government of India and the government of Jammu and Kashmir under Sheikh Abdullah have differences on the issue of the nature and scope of state's autonomy, extent of power of the central government in the affairs of the state and the pattern of centre-state relation. He made a speech at R.S.Pura, a border town near Jammu, where he reacted violently against the Jammu agitation and virtually threatening that the accession of the state could not be taken for granted. Another reason of his arrest was that the speeches of Sheikh became more and more strident, and it was clear that he was seriously working on the idea of independent status for Kashmir which was virtual negation of the Accession to India. Cited in Karan Singh, *Autobiography*, OUP, New Delhi, 1989, p.156.

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