

The mosaic of Jammu and Kashmir

Any move to alter the status of Jammu and Kashmir without evolving a system that can accommodate its diversities in a democratic manner will only heighten communal and regional tensions and add to the complexity of the Kashmir problem.

By BALRAJ PURI

There is no dearth of national and international experts offering their assessment of the situation and possible solutions to what is called the Kashmir problem. It is, therefore, time to remind all parties concerned of some basic facts about the people of the State that they may take into account while forming their opinions, whatever be their political interest or ideological angle.

Undoubtedly, the urge for an identity, which has been recognised by postmodern social scientists as one of the basic human urges, is as strong a motivating force in the political behaviour of the people of the State as it is for those living anywhere else. An elementary knowledge of the identities of the people of Kashmir is therefore indispensable for understanding the problems they are faced with. The most important fact in this context about the State is that it has far more kinds of diversities than any other State of India. For instance, followers of almost all major religions of the world live in Jammu and Kashmir. Its racial composition included Aryans, pre-Aryans, and Dardic and Tibeto-Mongolian races. Its Constitution recognises eight regional languages, and the number of dialects spoken is much larger.

If the interests and urges of a people with such diverse identities could be reconciled, the diversities themselves would have been a great source of strength for the State. But the failure to recognise and reconcile them became its biggest weakness. First, these diversities are not widely known. Secondly, there has been an overemphasis on only one kind of identity - the one based on religion.

Nobody can deny the role of religion and religion-based identities in shaping human behaviour. But no identity is monolithic, and there are other identities that cut across religious identities and sometimes play a more decisive and healthier role than the religious identity in determining this behaviour.

The fact that out of the three regions of the State, Kashmir is inhabited by pre-Aryan and non-Aryan races, Jammu by an Aryan race and Ladakh by Tibetan, Mongolian and Dardic races and that all the three have distinct geographical, historical and cultural backgrounds has also influenced the character and role of religion in each one of them.

For a variety of reasons the Kashmir Valley has a pivotal place in the politics of the State. Not only does the rest of the world know the State by this name but Kashmiri-speaking leaders have represented it nationally and internationally and

led all the governments in the State since Independence.

Although almost

all Kashmiris are Muslims after the migration of Kashmiri Pandits, who constituted barely 5 per cent of the population of the Valley, they are proudly conscious of their uninterrupted history of 5,000 years. No other community in the subcontinent can make such a claim. Originally inhabited by pre-Aryan tribes called Nagas and Pischachs, Kashmir accepted Vedic, Buddhist, Saivite and Islamic faiths, retaining the essence of the beliefs, rituals and practices of each of them and taking pride in its pre-Islamic achievements in the fields of, say, philosophy, culture and politics.

According to Kashmiri scholars and

the popular perception, Kashmir lost its independence for the first time in 1586 when Akbar annexed it to the Mughal empire. Before the annexation, it was ruled by Muslim kings for only 200 years, a period which Kashmiri Muslims consider to be a part of their earlier history of over 4,000 years. The non-Kashmiri rule of 364 years, which includes rule by Muslim kings like the Mughals and the Afghans for about 250 years, is disowned by them as a period of slavery in the same way as rule by non-Muslim, non-Kashmiri kings later.

The Kashmir Valley of

about 4,800 sq km is surrounded by mountains of heights ranging from 3,000 metres to 5,400 metres. Thus the region's geographical compactness and isolation, renowned beauty, cultural homogeneity, historical continuity and the political developments have created a strong sense of Kashmiri identity which is Islamised as much as Islam in Kashmir is Kashmirised. Another unique aspect of Kashmir is that its language, called Kashir, does not belong to the Indo-Aryan family of languages spoken from Dhaka to Peshawar. According to Grierson, the pioneering authority on Indian languages, Kashir is not of Sanskritic origin but of Dardic origin. Politically this unique identity was fractured by the migration of the microscopic but highly talented community of Kashmiri Pandits. Their contribution to Indian culture can hardly be ignored. Although neither Kashmiri Muslims nor Kashmiri Pandits can shed their common cultural and historical heritage, the recently created divergence in their political urges has to be taken note of.

The Kashmiri-speaking community does not

constitute the majority of the State. Before 1947, Jammu was the most populous region in the State. The Line of Control (LoC), which was oriented in such a way as to keep the Kashmiri-speaking region intact, divides the Jammu region. People across the LoC do not speak Kashmiri but share a common ethnic stock with people in Jammu.

According to the last Census (of 1981; there was no Census in

1991 in Jammu and Kashmir), the Kashmir region has 52 per cent of the State's population, of which 10 per cent is composed of non-Kashmiri communities such as Gujjars and Paharis, which are linguistically and ethnically closer to people in the Jammu region. Excluding the non-Muslim population of 5 per cent, the Kashmiri Muslim population is 37 per cent. Even if sectarian groups like Shias and other small ethnic groups are not discounted, there is a need to know more about the rest of the population, that is, at least 63 per cent of the population of the State, about 44 per cent of which is Muslim. As the attention of the national and international media as also Indian and foreign governments is almost entirely focussed on Kashmiri Muslims, they tend to get isolated from

the rest of the population of the State. In the process, they have suffered the most. In order to resolve their own problems as also those of the State as a whole and in the interest of maintaining and developing the Kashmiri identity, they need to know more about the nature and aspirations of the rest of the population, that is, the 63 per cent.

ACCORDING to the last Census, Jammu's population is 45 per cent of that of the State inhabiting an area of 66,560 sq km. In the south and the west are the Indian and Pakistani parts of Punjab respectively. Unlike Kashmir most parts of Jammu are mountainous and sub-mountainous.

Its plural society, almost entirely of Aryan stock, is 66 per cent Hindu, 30 per cent Muslim and 4 per cent Sikh. Three of the six districts adjoining the Kashmir region have a Muslim majority. The Scheduled Castes constitute 18.3 per cent of the region's population and 31 per cent of the Hindu population. The main beneficiaries of the radical land reforms of the early 1950s, the Scheduled Castes are economically, socially and politically a more advanced and distinct entity in the region than in many other parts of the country. Although the languages of the region belong to a single family, Dogri is spoken by the single largest community, which constitutes 53.8 per cent of the population and is culturally and politically dominant in the region. A number of dialects including Gojri, Pahari and Punjabi are spoken by the rest of the population. Except Gojri, these are spoken by all the religious communities. Gojri is exclusively the language of the Gujjars, all of whom are Muslims. But as a community the Gujjars have at least as much, if not more, emotional and ethnic affinity with the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of the neighbouring States of Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh as they could possibly have with their co-religionists in the State. They trace their ancestry to kings such as Prithvi Raj Chouhan and Kanishka and dynasties such as Hun which ruled North India as also to the community to which Nanda and Yashoda, who brought up Lord Krishna, belonged. They are one of the earliest settlers in Jammu. A part of them are nomads. Although scattered over Jammu and Kashmir and the neighbouring States, they remain a distinct entity and retain a broad homogeneity.

The Pahari community lives on both sides of the LoC. On the Indian side, they are concentrated in Kupwara and Uri sectors of the Kashmir region and Rajouri and Poonch districts of the Jammu region. The community also includes people living in Poonch, Muzaffarabad and Mirpur, who speak the same language with some small dialectic differences. The people living in areas under Pakistan's control also belong to the Pahari stock.

The Dogras and the Paharis constituted the army of the maharajas of the state. Until recently Poonch was a separate estate ruled by a local ruler. This district provided the largest number of recruits to the British army during the Second World War (as a percentage of the population of its youth in the whole of British India). The Pahari community on both sides of the Pir Panjal and the LoC is predominantly Muslim. The Hindu and Sikh members of the community, who had to migrate from the Pakistan-held area of the State, mostly live in Jammu district. The Gujjars and the Paharis, who have a rich tradition of folk literature, have in the past few decades developed written literature (poetry and prose).

identity developed more sharply after 1947, when political power shifted from the Jammu-based maharaja to Kashmir-based leaders and political and cultural influence of Punjab on it declined as the border with Pakistan's Punjab was sealed and the political and cultural centre of the Indian part of Punjab remained far away.

The phenomenal growth of Dogri as a written language and its recognition as a literary language by the Sahitya Akademi, the recognition gained by its literature and writers at the national level and the literary movements in Gojri and Pahari are evidence of a cultural upsurge of the emerging identities of the Jammu region. The literary movements in all the regional languages have grown in harmony. In fact, they cut across communal barriers and tend to undermine them.

Ladakh is the third region of Jammu and Kashmir. It has a population of two lakhs. Spread over an area of 1,17,150 sq km, the region is more than half the area of the undivided State as it existed before 1947. It has 1,280 km of common border with China, 560 km of it with Tibet and the rest with Sinkiang. It is separated from the rest of the country and the world by the Zojila Pass, 3,450 m above sea level; it is sub-divided by Fatu La, 4,000 m above sea level, into the districts of Leh and Kargil. Buddhists, who constitute 52 per cent of the population, are mainly concentrated in Leh district while Muslims (48 per cent, mostly Shia) live in Kargil. Ladakhi (also called Bodhi), Balti, Dardi and Shina are the main languages spoken in the region. Speakers of one language understand the other languages.

Ladakh was on the celebrated Silk Route. As an entrepot of trade between India, Central Asia and Tibet for centuries, Ladakh was a confluence of cultures. But its geographical position has helped it preserve its ancient culture and ways of life almost intact.

It was through Ladakh that Mahayana Buddhism, which was born in Kashmir, spread to Tibet, China and Japan. The Buddhists owe their allegiance to Lamas, who have their own discipline and hierarchy. They used to go to Tibet for religious training. But after the Chinese intervention in Tibet and the flight of the Dalai Lama along with some of his followers, Lhasa has lost its status as a source of religious and spiritual inspiration.

In Kargil, the Ulemas have a hold on Shias, who constitute the overwhelming majority of Muslims. Some of them have had their theological training in Iran and are followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. There is a small section of Shina-speaking Sunni Muslims in Drass, who are distinct from the Kashmiri-speaking Muslims and the Balti-speaking Shias in the rest of Kargil. Most speakers of Shina live across the LoC. Some affinity between the same language group living on either side of the LoC cannot be ruled out.

Different types of identities, which cut across and overlap one another, cannot be separated easily; nor can the aspirations of the people with these identities be satisfied in the present set-up. In fact, a centralised set-up and a unitary form of Constitution cannot accommodate its diversities. A

democratic, federal, plural and non-centralised system alone can ensure unity and harmony among them. Any move to alter the status of the State without attempting to evolve such a system would only generate communal and regional tensions and add to the complex Kashmir problem.