

Explosive Implications of Fissures within J&K

Contributed by Editor
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Problems within Jammu And Kashmir
State are not entirely due to conflict
between India and Pakistan. The

cause and effect relationship is the other way round also. Similarly, Pakistan alone cannot be held responsible for alienation of Kashmiris from the rest of India. Despite its best efforts, on the eve of Independence, and initial years after it, Pakistan could not weaken J&K's emotional relationship with India. The first emotional rupture took place in August 1953 when the popular Kashmiri leader Sheikh Abdullah was dismissed from power and detained. Main cause of the rupture was differences between the two regions of the state, namely Kashmir and Jammu, over the state's status within India.

Similarly, Kashmir problem had ceased to exist internationally in 1970s and 80s when, according to Mushaid Hussain, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of Pakistan National Assembly, "the word Kashmir did not exist in the lexicon of the foreign policy of Pakistan."

It was the developments within the state due to which the Kashmiri youth crossed the border to get arms and training. This youth then returned to start the militant movement in Kashmir.

Likewise, the current exclusive attention of the nation on Indo-Pak peace process to the total neglect of the emerging internal situation might have its repercussions internally and externally.

With the decline of militancy and the secessionist movement in Kashmir, the mainstream parties have filled the vacant space that provides regional sentiments of the valley an opportunity to assert themselves in the internal politics of the state. Regional sentiments of Jammu and Ladakh, on the other hand, have been further aroused since in the current talks on Kashmir problem, both at the national and international level, their leaders hardly matter. Consequently regional tensions have become sharper. Most of the issues of the state policy like grants of various departments, recruitments and promotions are fiercely debated on the basis of regional claims cutting across party lines in the political fora, in the state assembly and even in cabinet meetings.

In this situation, the BJP is trying to emerge as the most vocal voice of discontent in Jammu. It is, however, giving a nationalistic slant to the regional discontent and is opposing the proposals for enlarging the autonomy of the state "as a step towards its eventual secession". As a more desperate measure the party has revived the demand for a separate Jammu state. But its inherent weakness lies in the fact that the Muslims, who comprise majority in three out of six district of the region, do not trust it.

Otherwise, too, discontent in these districts is being directed towards a demand for a regional status. In the recently concluded session of the state assembly, six out of seven members from Rajouri and Poonch districts made a demand for a separate regional status. Similarly, associate member of the Congress from Doda, another Muslim majority district in Jammu, moved a bill for a similar status for Doda.

In the third region of the state, namely Ladakh, in the election to the Autonomous Council in Buddhist majority Leh district, the Union Territory Front won 25 out of 26 seats while the Congress won the remaining Muslim majority seat. The demand for separation of the region from the state has no support in the Muslim majority district of Kargil.

Whatever be the claims of the BJP in Jammu and the Union Territory Front in Ladakh, their demands, in effect, mean separation of Hindu-majority districts in Jammu and Buddhist-majority district in Ladakh region from the state. Their moves receive support from the Kashmir region also, in particular, in the much-laboured 266-page document entitled Achievable Nationhood recently released by People's Conference leader Sajjad Gani Lone. It has been received well in the valley and is widely noticed with sympathetic interest elsewhere. Without discussing the main theme of the document, the relevant proposal, for our present purpose, is the option it gives to "every district to opt out of the arrangement where a majority of the people feel that their rights are better protected by not being a part of the J&K". More specifically it concedes that "voices emanating from districts Jammu, Kathua and Ladakh would suggest the initiation of the opt out option."

The net effect of moves of the various quarters mentioned above is to divide the state on religious lines and carve out a Muslim state. One cannot be certain whether convergence of their final outcome is a mere coincidence. But such moves have been made in the past

also by think tanks and experts who have looked at the Kashmir problem from a religious angle. Former US president, Bill Clinton, had, for instance said that Kashmir was a problem of Hindu-Muslim relations. For Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, Samjhauta Express was a symbol of Hindus and Muslims working together.

It hardly needs to be emphasized that Kashmiri Muslims are Kashmiris as well as Muslims. Likewise, there are non-Kashmiri speaking Muslims who are as proud of their non-religious identity as of religious. Other non-Kashmiri Muslim communities include Gujars, Pahari-speaking, Sheena-speaking, Dogri-speaking and Ladakhi Muslims who in many respects are closer to their co-ethnic non-Muslims than to Kashmiri Muslims.

Kashmiri Muslims have to decide whether they should submerge their unique identity in a Muslim state— an option that they had rejected in 1947? Or learn to respect pride and rights of other communities and to live with them?

Regional identities are the greatest secularising force in the state. Secularised regions of Jammu and Ladakh are the best guarantee for preserving the Kashmiri identity. Question, therefore, is how to reconcile the interests and urges of the three regions to make a harmonious personality of the state.

Only a federal and decentralized polity can preserve emotional and political unity in a diverse state like J&K. On my pleadings, Nehru and Abdullah agreed to declare at a joint Press Conference on July 24, 1952 that the constitution of the state would provide for regional autonomy. Again J&K State People's Convention, convened by Sheikh Abdullah in 1968 and attended by almost the entire political spectrum of the Kashmir valley, unanimously accepted my draft on internal constitution of the state that provided for regional autonomy and further devolution of power to the district, block, and panchayat levels.

Finally, as the head of the officially appointed Regional Autonomy Committee, I submitted a report in 1998 which discussed details of the constitutional framework of a five-tier set up, providing for political, economic and cultural safeguards to all regions and ethnic communities therein. In particular, it suggested eight-point formula for allocation of funds to regions, and districts. The formula included aspects like area, population, road mileage in proportion to the area, infant mortality, literacy rate of girl children, share in state services, share in

admissions to technical educational institutions and contribution to state exchequer. It takes care of interests of the backward areas of the state.

These ideas can provide a basis for a wider discussion to evolve a consensus for building a stable and secular identity of the state. Without that any dialogue on its external status may encourage sectarian and communal forces that could threaten the secular character of the state and the country as also peace in the subcontinent.