

Eternity And Now: Self-inflicted Wounds In Kashmir

It seems some places are destined to remain sorrowful, in spite of the best efforts of some of their people to make them otherwise. Kashmir is one of them.

Over thousands of years Kashmir has been a prey to the attackers from many foreign lands: Afghanistan, Mongolia, Turkey, Tibet. Sometimes I think that if Kashmir had not been as beautiful as it is, it would have had a more peaceful history than it has had, because its Shangri-La image has been an enormous attraction for the empire builders, adventurers, looters, and religious zealots. If Kashmir had been a place looking like any of the other states of India, Pakistan would not have vied for it with the same passion as it has. Kashmir's beauty turns it into a spiritual place, a clarion call for one's deepest religious or artistic sensibilities.

The majority of the local people of Kashmir started as Hindus, then changed to Buddhism, then reverted to Hinduism, and then changed to Islam. The history of Kashmir is tempered with extreme changes, long foreign occupations, extreme material lust, wanton killings, and religious persecution. A place pregnant with ethereal serenity and covered with enthralling beauty has been soaked with blood and hatred over many stretches of its history.

This contrast between Kashmir's natural and historical faces struck me with stunning intensity during my recent three-week trip there. The Kashmir of nature is still awesomely inspiring but the Kashmir of history is a wounded being, struggling to come back to life.

Dal Lake, a tapestry of tranquility and gracefulness, charisma and style, is both sensually intoxicating as well as spiritually tranquilizing. Its mystery and mystique

transcends common understanding. It stands adjoining the other Kashmir, Old Srinagar, where a large number of people live. I visited its decrepit, mean streets, its rickety morose houses, punctuated sometimes with new houses, its abandoned crumbling Pandit houses. The creased faces of the people of Old Srinagar are etched with a million memories. They remember the revolution against the unfair Dogra rule, they remember repulsing the Pakistan government backed tribal attack of October, 1947. The promise of Naya Kashmir burned bright at that time. It was the first time in thousands of years that the political power in Kashmir was in the hands of its people. A new star appeared in the firmament of Kashmir, it was in the form of a tall, lean, and strong-minded Kashmiri leader named Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, popularly known as Sher-i-Kashmir. In 1931, this born-leader challenged the might of the Dogra king Hari Singh, for equal opportunity for the majority of the state population, Muslims, with Dogras and Pandits. He also challenged the absolute monarch to change his government to a “responsible” government, which looked after the welfare of all the people and the integrity of the state. But his biggest war front was for the fair treatment of the landless peasants, the majority of whom were Muslims. His revolution in Kashmir ran parallel with the ongoing revolution for the freedom of India from Britain, spearheaded by Indian National Congress. He was mesmerized by its leaders Gandhi and Nehru. When the partition of India became a plan, he chose India to be Kashmir’s partner, rather than Pakistan. He rejected Pakistan, on the basis that it was going to be a religious state, with not much care for the landless peasants, much to the bitterness and disappointment of its leader, Jinnah. His people unequivocally supported him in this.

A few years later the dream of Naya Kashmir started to unravel, as its chief architect, Sher-i-Kashmir, started to have another dream, that of an independent nation of Kashmir. Arrested on Aug. 9, 1953, due to his malfeasance, Sher-i-Kashmir’s fall plunged Kashmiris into a new sorrow, so deep and intense that its shadows still haunt the people, even after its occurrence 58 years ago. Sher-i-Kashmir’s dream of an independent nation of Kashmir was the greatest self-inflicted wound for Kashmiris. Even though, after regaining political power in 1975, after spending 13 years in Indian jails, he abandoned his dream, but the shadow of mistrust, engendered by his break-up with his commitment to Gandhi and Nehru, between Kashmiri Muslims and Government Of India, has remained a

dark and impregnable cloud on the horizon.

Kashmiri history is replete with self-inflicted wounds. We let many foreign invaders in Kashmir, many without even a token resistance. Granted that in those times it fell to the ruling monarchs to defend the land, but the equanimity with which Kashmiris accepted the foreigners is deeply troubling. When Rinchin usurped the throne of Kashmir, the reigning monarch Sahadeva was hiding in Kisthawar, having given the responsibility of the defense of the throne to his commander-in-chief Rama Chandra.

After the end of thousands of years of rule by kings, sultans, and governors, many of whom were cruel, barbarous, cut-throat opportunists, plunderers, good-for-nothing rascals, racists, and nincompoops, we stumbled upon the incredible opportunity of democracy in Kashmir, helped by the Indian freedom movement against the British, in which the role of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was that of the chief architect. Naya Kashmir was the answered prayers, liberation from thousands of years of tyranny and slavery. What did Kashmiris do with it? They ruined it by the lack of scruples, greed, and blindness.

Within five years after Kashmir gained democracy, its chief architect started dreaming of an independent nation of Kashmir, whose feasibility he well knew was impossible. If the leader lost his brains, why did the masses have to lose them too? Kashmiri Muslims were also lured into the Lotus-eaters mood of freedom. What happened after that? Kashmir's relations with India soured badly. Who suffered the more in the test of the wills; of course, the Kashmiri Muslims?

In 60s and 70s Kashmir let itself be swept with the Islamic fundamentalism. Whatever happened to the famous Kashmiri sense of survival? Leaving survival far away, Kashmiris plunged into a suicide, they became contemptuous of India. Pakistan's attack on Kashmir in 1965 removed any illusions of the continuation of the 1947 status-quo between it and India. If Pakistan was really keen to have

Kashmir, why did it not go for an all-out war for it, and extricated it from the greedy clutches of India? Pakistan was not willing to go that far, as it did not want to hurt itself that much. But why did not Kashmiris see the selfish and weak will of its suitor?

Kashmiris let themselves be drifted aimlessly, without embracing Pakistan fully, or without rejecting India fully. Can a people survive decently in such a double-handed game? Kashmiris have let themselves be humiliated, used, and mistreated by Pakistan. What happened to Kashmiris' honor and pride? Kashmiris lost their touch with the ground, floating in fantasy and fear.

In 1989 war with India, assiduously hatched by Pakistan over several years, Kashmiri Muslims fell for the call for the consolidation of Islamic people. They forgot that they could not win against India and that they were being used by Pakistan. The result, after twenty-two years of civil war, is that Kashmiris are isolated and hanging dry. They are living tormented lives, at the mercy of India and Pakistan, and losing their Kashmiri Pandit brethren. 400,000 Pandits ran for their lives, leaving behind their jobs, homes, and friends, and a culture woven over several thousand years, becoming refugees in their own country.

Kashmiris no longer want to merge with Pakistan, having come to know of its benightedness, but are now gripped with a demonic passion for an independent nationhood. They forget that their only genuine leader, Sheikh Abdullah, spent thirteen years in Indian jails without realizing it, ending up giving up that suicidal dream. Why have Kashmiris lost their capacity for reasoning? India cannot give them freedom, because there is not a single M.P. in the Indian Parliament who will vote for that. And for a good reason. Even if, hypothetically, Kashmir were given independence, any fool can see that within six months Pakistan will capture it. So, why would India give independence to Kashmir, when it would amount to handing it to Pakistan on a platter? Giving Kashmir to Pakistan is not an option for India, as it would bring the northern international border of India closer to its capital by 300 miles, and it will destabilize the 170 million Muslim community's ties with India. Also, the terrorist culture of Pakistan and its unstable political

climate will be breathing closer over India's neck. Let us imagine that somehow India gives independence to Kashmir, which is followed inevitably, within a short time, with Pakistan's usurpation of it. Will Kashmir then call India to help it defend itself, as it did in 1947? And if Kashmir were to do that, would India oblige it?

Many idealists scream that people have an inherent right for freedom and that is why Kashmiris should be given it, but they forget that while a divorce between married couples is granted in many civilized countries of the world, but the mankind has not yet reached a state of development when a part of a nation can get a divorce from the nation. Once a part gets integrated with a nation, economically, politically, and militarily, and has historical ties with it, a separation is almost impossible. In exceptional cases when a divorce has taken place, it has been at the cost of a lot of blood. Kashmiris are not revolutionaries by any stretch of imagination. They have to make best of what they have. After 64 years of waffling it is high time for peaceful living.

Lots of different groups have suffered in the war of 1989: Indian military and Jammu and Kashmir Police, Kashmiri Pandits, and Kashmiri Muslims. But the group that has suffered the most has been Kashmiri Muslims. There have been families who lost their main providers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, relatives and friends. The greatest sufferers of the calamity have to be the children. The children who were raised in the state of mayhem, gloom, and mental depression. Studies on the children of World War II soldiers have reported their constrained emotional and psychological development. The Muslim children will carry their traumas deeper and longer in their lives, compared to the children of other groups, because their traumas are magnified by the largeness of their group. They will grow with fractured emotions and stained psychologies. Such a heavy price for their parents' lust, first for a union with Pakistan, and then for independence. When a thing is impossible to achieve, how long can you keep on bashing your head against a rock? Young, bright Kashmiri Muslims will hit glass-ceilings when they aspire for higher level positions in their jobs outside Kashmir. For generations to come Kashmiri Muslims will be ostracized in social, professional, and political spheres outside Kashmir, because of the image of

religious fanaticism and disloyalty toward India they have created by their war with it.

After my customary walk on Boulevard every morning, one day I decided to have my morning tea at Zabarwan Park restaurant, a government-run business. I found no customers in it, in fact I saw a man sleeping on the floor. I had just about-turned when I suddenly saw a man walking toward me. He told me I could only have a cup of tea at that time. We ended up sitting on a table in the lawn outside the restaurant, and started talking, without the help of tea. I was surprised that he opened the subject of Kashmir Problem. He seemed to be looking at a large historical landscape. He told me how Kashmiri Pandits were the original inhabitants of the Valley. He stated that they had to leave their homeland because of the recommendation of then Jammu and Kashmir governor, Jagmohan. I interjected his thesis by telling him how in 1989-90 Muslims commanded them to leave or else die. This rude awakening of his memory by me set him on a fairer assessment of the Kashmir Problem. He asked why there was so much army in Kashmir. I explained to him that the army was sent to Kashmir on Maharaja Hari Singh's request in the first place, when Pakistan attacked it in October, 1947. After Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah started cooling toward Kashmir's integration with India, after assuming Prime Ministership, Indian army had to be more vigilant. This was followed by Mo-e-Muqqadas episode, which was followed by Pakistan's 1965 attack on Kashmir. Most of the presence of army in Kashmir is due to Pakistan's continuing machinations. Had Kashmiris remained a steadfast partner of India and peacefully worked out their differences with it, the presence of army would have remained at about 1947 level, unless Pakistan had intensified its military posture at the border with Kashmir. Listening to the outline of the genesis of Kashmir Problem from me, he turned philosophical, and said what did Muslims get out of the twenty-two years of the civil war? Then he said wistfully that Pandits should return to Kashmir. He seemed to me symptomatic of a tide of the fresh thinking among some Kashmiris that their war against India was totally misconceived and had rocked their lives destructively. Another person I talked Kashmir Problem with, lot more educated man than the earlier person, told me why was India so scared about holding the much ballyhooed and maligned plebiscite in Kashmir, as election after election, National Conference, a staunchly pro-India political party, had won the plurality of the votes?

The whole edifice of Kashmir Problem rests on airy columns of Islamic purity and consolidation of Islam round the world. Such ideals have no feet to stand on in the multiculturalism and internationalism we live in. The world is becoming a global village, where religious identity is no longer the highest level identity. Islam has never been difficult to practice in Kashmir. If there would not have been some foreign and a few local deluded, selfish, and vile hands exciting Kashmiris to religious fanaticism, they would have lived peaceful, constructive, and prosperous lives since 1947. Imagine how much happiness has been lost. A few rotten apples have turned the whole barrel into a malodorous and unsightly lot.

Gods gave a stunningly beautiful and bounteous land to Kashmiris, but they turned it into a political wasteland, a cancerous body, a sorrowful place.

Here are two faces of Kashmir: one eternally soul-uplifting and the other doomed by self-inflicted wounds.

In the folds of Kashmiri mountains resides the solemnity of gods,
In the swirls of its breezes plays the music of the universe,
Kashmir is the eternal enigmatic smile of God,
Disturbed now by some selfish and rude outsiders and insiders,
A dagger thrust in the grand design,
My tears flow to wash its wounds.

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