

Upheaval In Kashmir

“Science without religion is lame,
religion without science is blind.”

—A. Einstein.

The eruption of turmoil in Kashmir has uncovered one more religious fundamentalist wound in the world. Some of the 3 million Muslims there, who make up 85% of the population, would like to form an Islamic republic, or join one, Pakistan, which is conveniently a contiguous neighbor.

Religion has been one of the preeminent components of man’s mental infrastructure from even before the emergence of civilization. At its highest level it has provided the psychological and moral basis for human life, the vision, the values, and the motivation for living. But because it operates on a priori and unquestioning basis its driving force is visionary emotion and not the architecture of reasoning. As Stefan Zweig said, “Every conscience wishes the death of every other conscience,” the absolute character of religion has created much killing and suffering in mankind. Many a page in human history is soaked in the blood of religious massacres. Man has learnt a lot by his experience and yet his propensity to forget the lessons he has learnt is enormous. That is why all civilized countries separate the governance of people from the practice of religion.

To the ills of poverty, disease, ignorance, and slavery facing mankind add another: religious fundamentalism. Its driving force is insecurity and narcissism. Fundamentalists want to live by the purity of the vision of God, a simplistic and a fairy tale mental existence, where the major ordering factors of life come only in binary logic: good, evil; right, wrong; heaven, hell; life, death. Everything comes in either black or white, the gray shades do not exist. Muslim fundamentalists want to go back to the old ways of Islamic life and Koranic laws, while the rest of the world is trying to find a new way to live and a new social understanding. They see evil in science and technology, freedom of women, and irreligious enjoyment of life. Finding a lot of the world holding different visions of life they want to recoil back within their own group, insulated from change. They find scientific thinking threatening the security of their world. Their half-hearted attempts to go along with the modern life have produced enough confusion in them to want to go back wholeheartedly to the ancient way of living. Religious fundamentalism is the last ditch effort to stem the spreading wave of the western style scientific

humanism. To live life on the principles of equality of all men and to pursue personal happiness in a natural way, and to approach the understanding of life, the world, and the universe in a scientific fashion has been the greatest setback to religious way of living. Fundamentalists believe that the highest state of their religion can be achieved by the literal observance of its codes and that the pristine glow of their spiritual vision can be realized by the unwavering and the relentless pursuit of their faith.

Extremist religious organizations invariably interpret their religious books literally rather than coming to grips with the metaphor behind the text. Philosophy is not emphasized enough to raise the level of understanding among the common followers. Along with the zealots there are opportunists who exploit the economically downtrodden to pursue their goals of power and economic profit.

In the reckless pursuit of their fantasies the militants in Kashmir have ignored the civil rights of minorities, notably half a million Buddhists living in the higher valleys of Ladakh, one hundred and fifty thousand Hindus and Sikhs living in Srinagar and its environs, and one and a half million Hindus living in the southern part of the state called Jammu. The Muslims constitute 60% of the population of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Selected Hindu civil servants perceived to be the enemies of the fundamentalists cause have been gunned down. A state of terror reigns over the valley of Kashmir and all the offices, businesses, and schools have remained closed for last four months, without a hope of reopening in immediate future. There is round the clock military curfew, paralyzing the life. There are no negotiations going on with the government as the fundamentalists have no intentions to do so. They have no publicly known leaders. With summer tourism revenues of \$350 million dollars lost this year the future is catastrophic. This nightmarish situation has been going on for a third of a year now and the end is nowhere in sight. Hindus and other minorities are locking up their residences and fleeing the valley of death. Chaos, paralysis, and fear have reduced the life for most of the people to an indefinite house-arrest.

Bars, movie halls and video parlors in Srinagar, the summer capital of the state, have been closed at gun-point, as they are considered the means of moral ruination. Women are being forced to cover their faces to let men keep their lust in check, bearing resemblance to post-Afghan invasion era in the state.

Kashmiris are an independent-minded people, timid but egotistical, sensitive but proud, non-conformist but practical. The roots of Kashmiri culture are deeply

interconnected with India as far back as 3000 B.C. The Muslims took root in Kashmir in Shah Mir's time in 1339 A.D. and this was followed by a turmoil filled era under the Chaks, the Mougals, and the Afghans, when a systematic genocide of the masses in Srinagar and its environs was undertaken by a number of ruthless rulers. A brief breather was provided when Pandit Birbal Dhar sought the help of the Sikh Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, whose armies routed the Pathans at Shopian in 1819 A.D. The Sikh governors generally proved to be tough masters. This was followed by the Dogra rule when Maharaja Gulab Singh acquired Kashmir through the sale from the British in 1846 and the state of Jammu and Kashmir was born. Before the Indian independence in 1947, the Rajas, the Maharajas, and the Nawabs of approximately 600 autonomous states were given the choice of joining either secular India or Muslim Pakistan or to remain independent. Surprisingly, Maharaja Han Singh of Jammu and Kashmir did not join the union of India until the Kabailis (tribesmen) backed by Pakistan army invaded the state. The King fled Srinagar on October 22, 1947 and signed the letter of accession to India on October 24. The Indian troops were sent to Srinagar with the consent of the popular Muslim leader, Sheikh M. Abdullah, on October 27. They repulsed the attackers up to only sixty miles from Srinagar at Un, because of international pressures brought about by Pakistan via UNO. India had acquired a beautiful though a perilous gift. It could not let go the prize, but did not know the price it would have to pay to keep it.

The Indian strategy was to keep this underdeveloped state economically protected and its borders with Pakistan secure. The Indian government paid heavy bills for it and passed a special amendment in its national constitution (Article 370) to protect the state further by disallowing outsiders to buy property in it. A large majority of Kashmiri Muslims and some Hindus prospered immensely in the four decades that followed. The strategy worked most of the time but extracted a heavy toll from India. By pampering Kashmiris all the time they became bereft of the sense of responsibility a citizen owes its state. Greed stifled their development as equal partners of their state. Though enjoying the attention they were getting, some of them never renounced their desire to form an Islamic state or join one. In fact, there was always a veiled threat to revert to their desire if Indian Government did not continue the son-in-law treatment of them. This sordid relationship of purchased loyalty is the essence of the problem. Forty years of support, care, and pampering by India has not dulled the Islamic propensity of some Kashmiri Muslims to live in a pure state of their ethos, unmixed with other religious communities. Muslim communities around the world would like to do the

same. After passing away of the popular Muslim leader, Sheikh Abdullah, and with the proliferation of Islamic upheavals in the world, the separatist movement found a good climate to grow in. The last chief Minister Farooq Abdullah's chaotic and permissive leadership provided a strong catalyst to it. The victories of the Sikhs fighting their cause in the neighboring Punjab provided further encouragement. What was merely an excitement triggering sport for a few unemployed youth only four years ago, due to local governments negligence, in fact permissiveness, mushroomed into a fundamentalist force.

The recent meeting of the terrorist's demands by the government in exchange for the freedom of federal Home Minister's kidnapped daughter was the spark which ignited the movement's powder-keg. While the watershed political movements in Europe are leading the way from totalitarian systems toward democracy and secularism, the present rebellion in Kashmir is aspiring to achieve the identity of a people through a religious state.

What should a nation do in such a situation? There are hundreds of separatist movements round the world, some have gone public, others are still under cover. Each has a unique history and present circumstances. We can not let every separatist group's call be met under the reasoning that freedom is better than forced coexistence. Each case has to be evaluated on its merits. We can not let nations be dismembered because of identification problems of one group with the rest of the groups in the community. In the long run, such separatist movements may do more harm than good to its people. Discipline required to coexist, difficult and even painful at times, may be rewarding.

In Kashmir, the present revolution is not even aimed at democracy, which exists there at the same superficial level as it does in the rest of India, it is pointed toward gaining ascendancy to a total religious way of living, in state, public, and personal spheres.