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## Self-Determination in Kashmir: Identity, Islam, and the Search for Justice

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South Asia

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This past year has witnessed India and Pakistan battling over an area that has known little peace since 1947. While the two states speak of 'nationalism', 'secularism' or 'Muslim unity', and various Islamist organizations call for *jihad*, most Kashmiris speak of 'self-determination' and 'Kashmiri identity'. The idea of self-determination as independence was first formulated in 1947 by the last Hindu Dogra Maharaja, Hari Singh. The concept of a distinct Kashmiri identity (*kashmiriyat*) evolved in the 1930s with a movement, explicitly involving both Muslim and Hindu intelligentsia, against feudal-cum-colonial rule. The notion of a discrete Kashmiri citizenship goes back to the 1920s, when Kashmiri Hindus, facing competition from Punjabi Hindus, pressed for a formal definition of 'state subjects'.

With South Asian decolonization and the creation of Pakistan and India in 1947, the Kashmiri struggle attained international proportions. While Hari Singh signed the conditional accession of the state to the Indian Union, and India and Pakistan fought their first war, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) was formed to free Kashmir from both India and Pakistan. The United Nations cease-fire declaration in 1949 split Jammu and Kashmir into roughly 65% (east and south of the cease-fire line) and 35% (to the west and north) controlled by India and Pakistan respectively. The Pakistani portion is inhabited mostly by non-Kashmiri Sunni Muslims, with Shias in pockets. The Indian portion consists of several distinct areas, the Valley, inhabited overwhelmingly by Kashmiris (largely Sunni, with Shia, Hindu and Sikh minorities), being the most problematic.

Till 1953 efforts towards social justice continued: feudal rule was abolished, and land and tax reforms were undertaken by the National Conference (NC) government under Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. Welcomed especially by the unbelievably poor rural Valley Muslims and lower-caste Hindus to the south, they antagonized wealthy Muslims and Hindus, notably the landed gentry, who received no compensation. The NC's urban popularity continued, largely because of Abdullah's adherence to *kashmiriyat*. While the Valley waited impatiently for the promised plebiscite, to the south, citing Indian nationalism, the communal and obscurantist Praja Parishad – many of whose members were adversely affected by the land reforms – and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh incited fear among Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan about renewed atrocities by Muslims, were a plebiscite to take place. Against this background the 'Delhi Agreement' was signed in July 1952, spelling out the mutual limits of authority of the Kashmiri and Indian states and reneging on the promised plebiscite. It denied the ethos of *kashmiriyat* and was never accepted by most Kashmiris. All vestiges of democracy were shed in 1953 with Abdullah's dismissal by the Indian government and his incarceration till 1968.

While crushing dissent, India now embarked on creating a consumer culture. The Valley had a dense structure of ties cutting across trade, bureaucracy, artisanship, cash crop horticulture and politics. Both those who wanted independence and those who favoured accession to Pakistan – and these included many among the Muslim landed gentry and the mercantile class – were part of these networks. Political opponents were now co-opted into the system of economic benefits, primarily through Indian subsidies. Little moral opprobrium was attached to the massive corruption that resulted, since 'Indian money' was involved. A middle class

emerged which could ill afford to be openly anti-India, while participating in a sullen opposition to Indian rule. Economic gains percolated down to the villages, but migration to towns continued and the number of unemployed youth grew. With issues of social justice neglected, muffled dissent and unabated Pakistani propaganda, the idea of Kashmiri nationalist resistance also grew. The Algerian struggle against France, the Vietnam war and the Palestinian movement all had their impact. Working-class Muslim teenagers often demonstrated, many being routinely arrested, manhandled, and humiliated.

#### The emergence of religion as a factor

In 1972, following the third Indo-Pakistan war and the formation of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan signed the 'Simla Accord', explicitly ignoring the wishes of the Kashmiri people. Also in 1972, while members of the Plebiscite Front were debarred from contesting elections, the Indian Congress Party ensured the Jama'at-e Islami (JI) a victory against the NC in five seats. The notions of *kashmiriyat* and self-determination appeared more dangerous to Indian rule than Islamic fundamentalism. Politically, the JI remained weak and won only one seat in the first and last fair elections in 1977, but it was inculcating fundamentalism and inciting hatred and contempt for non-Muslims in schools in villages where state schools often existed only nominally. Hindu fundamentalists now also began inculcating a brand of Hinduism entirely alien to Kashmir. Between 1933 and 1986 the Valley witnessed no communal riots, yet mutual mistrust and an uneasy co-existence characterized Muslim-Hindu relations.

By the 1980s, facing increasing competition from Muslims and feeling discriminated against by the Kashmir government, many educated Hindus took up jobs in India. Simultaneously, increasing migration among Muslim professionals to the Gulf and the West and the resulting remittance economy created a nouveau riche, whose opulent lifestyle clashed with that of the conservative working and lower-middle classes. While socio-economic disparities grew, middle and lower-middle-class Muslims aspired to greater political power. With the NC repeatedly giving in to blackmail by the Congress, most Kashmiris looked for an alternative political party. Hoping to crush opposition, the Congress played the 'religious' card and harped on the differences between Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus; Pakistani propaganda echoed this theme. Political and economic conflict was interpreted in 'religious' terms by all concerned, and increasingly Kashmiris sought solace in orthodox forms of their respective religions. The Iranian revolution, the Soviet ('India's friend') defeat in Afghanistan, India's cold shouldering the Afghan resistance, the rise of the Central Asian republics and the Sikh

movement for 'Khalistan' now encouraged Kashmiri Muslims to conceive of their own empowerment in terms of Islam. With Kashmiri Hindus increasingly considered pro-Congress, hence pro-India and thus anti-Kashmir, Kashmiri identity became synonymous with Kashmiri Muslim identity.

#### Resorting to arms

Indian policy now changed from co-optation to confrontation, and in 1987 the Muslim United Front (MUF), a conglomeration of opposition groups voted for by some 60% Kashmiris, was declared defeated. Waves of strikes, assassinations, bomb blasts, kidnappings and arson swept the Valley, peaking in 1990. The components of the MUF formed armed outfits (Al Barq, Al Fateh, Al Jihad, etc.), and thousands took up arms supplied by Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI); the first of these grew into the armed wing of the JKLF. Coming from urban families who had failed to penetrate the existing economic networks, the militants were dangerous to the Indian state, but also to the Kashmiri ruling class. A violent movement contesting the appropriation of resources by a chosen few was imminent. Aspiring to political power, expecting more direct help from Pakistan and the West, and under-rating the Indian army, the middle class supported the militants, setting aside internal socio-economic contradictions and averting the dangers of *fitna*. With ISI training and arms, the militants proclaimed *jihad* for political justice and *kashmiriyat*. This justified extortion, kidnappings, and forcible entry into wealthier Muslim homes; monetary 'contributions' were accepted in lieu of taking up arms.

The attempt to combine radical Islam with *kashmiriyat* failed, however. The call for *jihad*, coupled with the murder of some Kashmiri Hindus, threats to many others, and the Indian campaign to depict the issue as a 'communal' conflict terrified the vast majority of Kashmiri Hindus into accepting Indian help to flee the Valley. With their rapid departure, the concept of *kashmiriyat* died; but its demise was inevitable anyway: *kashmiriyat* meant little to Srinagar's wealthy Muslim Punjabis, who largely favour accession to Pakistan, rather than independence; *kashmiriyat* was irrelevant for the 'liberation' of areas outside the Valley; the mystically-oriented Islam typical for the Valley and part and parcel of *kashmiriyat* was suspected by the funding agencies. Hence, *kashmiriyat* was discarded and replaced by more militant Islamic concepts (e.g. *jihad*, *mujahid*, *shahid*, *Nizam-e Mustafa*). Though attempts to enforce veiling, attendance at Friday prayers and a ban smoking all failed, women's hair dressing salons and cinema houses were forcibly closed, cosmetics and alcohol were prohibited and bands of armed youngsters combed the bye-lanes to check on proper behaviour. Islamic guerrilla groups – Allah Tigers, Al-Umar Mujahidin, Hizbullah, Ikhwan-ul Mujahidin – multiplied,

with the mainly rurally recruited Hizb-ul Mujahidin (HM), the JI's armed wing, dominating from 1990 onwards. India responded with about 400,000 soldiers and militia, who battled the militants, but also shot many suspects and resorted to extreme physical and psychological repression. Soon countless families grieved over those killed, tortured, or raped; thousands were arrested; hundreds disappeared without a trace, and hundreds are still in prison.

With arms and money flowing in, factional shoot-outs escalated. By 1993 several Afghans, Sudanese, Palestinians and Yemenites joined the battle; the JKLF no longer received much Pakistani help and became a prime target of the HM. To survive, it declared a unilateral cease-fire in 1994 that led to its further splitting and to many of its men joining the Jama'at-ul Ulema-e Islami (JUI)-linked Harkat-ul Ansar/Harkat-ul Mujahidin or the Markaz-ul Dawa-ul Irshad-linked Lashkar-e Toiba (LT), demonstrating that no discrete boundaries divide 'fundamentalists' from 'non-fundamentalists' – simply shades of grey representing varying ad hoc strategies based on different aspects and degrees of faith and on attempts to fulfil personal commitments to principles of specifically Islamic justice. These principles are also instrumentalized by various organizations – the JI, the JUI, the ISI – to fight their own battles in Kashmir.

To curb in-fighting, many militant organizations, including the JKLF and the JI, formed the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) with the common objective of pressing for 'self-determination' and the establishment of a society that is in keeping with Islamic values. By spring 1999 there was relative peace in the Valley, with hundreds of armed ex-militants from various groups employed by the Government to take suspects and terrorize their kin. Like the Afghan Hizb-e Islami and the Al-Badr Mujahidin, the APHC supported the 1999 invasion by Pakistan and the United Jihad Council (an apex body of fourteen Islamic organizations) in northern Kashmir; as the LT put it, this is 'a war between Islam and paganism'. More than ever before, the concepts of 'self-determination' and 'Kashmiri identity' defy definition. ◆

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