

Understanding Religious Radicalization Issues, Threats and Early Warnings in Kashmir Valley

Arjimand Hussain Talib

Columnist / Writer, Srinagar, J&K

Kashmir Valley has often been celebrated as one of the living ideals of syncretic traditions, where various religious beliefs have peacefully co-existed and flourished alongside for centuries. However, the Valley's history has also witnessed periods when all major religions have competed for political and social supremacy. Religion has been employed as an instrument for political domination, both by political and religious leaders and institutions. The political turmoil in the post-1930s period has often witnessed periods of religious radicalization, seeking to redefine and set Kashmir's political agenda. However, this period has also witnessed a neutralization of the forces that have spearheaded radicalization movements in the first place. Such neutralization has happened as a natural consequence and because of certain deliberate state actions as well.

Today, greater levels of education among Kashmiris are working both ways. At one level they are creating a critical mass of people who are more willing to understand, respect and co-exist with people of other faiths. At another, greater exposure to global political developments, mainly in the Middle East, evokes sentiments of radicalization and aversion to peaceful co-existence with other religions. For another section of the population, religion remains a key instrument in furthering the political agenda and seeking a restoration of Kashmir's political rights. For this segment, secular democratic politics has failed in the realization of the greater political goals.

There are two facets of the debate on religious radicalization in Kashmir. At one level, the trends of organized radicalization are on a clear decline. The decimation of the structures and cadres of organizations like the once influential Jamaat-i-Islami and its offshoot organizations during the last twenty years has seen a systematic decline in the trend of organized radicalization. On the other hand, events like the Amarnath land controversy of 2008 have served to radicalize vast sections of Kashmir's youth, who see such developments as a clear manifestation of furthering 'Hindu India's religious domination over Kashmir' and the 'dilution of its overwhelmingly Muslim character'.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

The age of colonization changed the face of the world in many ways. The

Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi

developing an alternative framework for peace and security in the region



adventures of drawing boundaries on maps – creating political entities in disregard of ethnic, national, religious and geographical considerations – has created a world often based on unnatural political and identity considerations. In the post-colonial period, Africa got countries based on the division of tribes and ethnicities, which even to this day do not recognize country-boundaries. The Arab world, bound by a common culture, language and religion, got divided into several ‘nation-states’. The Indian sub-continent’s reorganization was far from perfect. Much of the Far East lost its original shape once the western colonizers left.

As in most of the post-colonial world, history gave birth to a political and geographical entity in the shape of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) state which is far from perfect. The state’s present geographical and political makeup is a reflection of the same historical accidents, rooted in colonial imagination of the post-colonial borders. The Treaty of Amritsar compounded this historical accident. And then the subsequent decades of the autocratic Dogra Maharaja rule over the majority Muslim population and the division of the state, gave birth to a complex and chaotic polity.

‘Demographic Change’ and Religious Radicalization

The debate on religious demography has been a major issue in J&K, which has been strengthening the notion of an ‘engineered demographic change’ being carried out to change Kashmir’s majority Muslim character. This issue is a highly emotive one – something which, in the first place, fuelled the agitation against the Amarnath land transfer in Kashmir in 2008. This issue continues to breed religious radicalism in Kashmir. Certain official statistical data reinforce this perception.

As per the 1941 census, while the total Muslim population of J&K was 72.41 per cent, Hindus comprised 25.01 per cent of a total population of 2946728. According to the 1961 census, the Muslim composition reportedly decreased to 68.30 per cent as against an increased 28.45 per cent of Hindus (of the reported total population of 3560976). The trend has been continuing: according to the 1971 census (of a total population of 4616632), the Muslim population was again reported to be on a decline and stood at 65.85 per cent while the Hindu population had grown to 30.42 per cent. According to the 1981 Census, for a total population of 5987389, the Hindu population was again reported to have risen to 32.24 per cent,

while the Muslim population was reported to have reduced to 64.19 per cent. This trend has been found to fuel a sense of insecurity and siege among the Kashmiri Muslims.

According to census figures, quoted in an article by Praveen Swami in the *Frontline* in October 2000, in Doda district, while the Hindu population had grown by 47.23 per cent between 1971 and 1981, that of Muslims increased by only 11.97 per cent. In Udhampur, the respective figures for the same period were 45 per cent against 6.35 per cent. In Rajouri, the Hindu population grew by 47.72 per cent against 33.01 per cent of the Muslim population. The Hindu population of Kathua was reported to have grown by 39.31 per cent while the Muslim population had “fallen” by 14.57 per cent. In Jammu district, the Hindu population was reported to have “grown” by 36.14 per cent while the Muslim population had “fallen” by 29.98 per cent. This trend in religious demography remains the principal reason for the isolated trends of radicalization among Muslims in Kashmir.

Political and Economic ‘Discrimination’: Fuelling Religious Radicalization

The three regions of the Jammu and Kashmir – Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh – continue to nurse their own feelings of neglect and discrimination vis-à-vis each other. These feelings and perceptions have served to sharpen both regional and religious divides. One of the spin offs of these feelings has been religious radicalization, the creation of political and religious platforms which are exclusive in nature and sharing a common aversion to accommodation and inclusiveness. The pattern of political representation in the state assembly and local municipal bodies in the cities of Srinagar, Jammu and Leh symbolizes this divide and pattern.

Some of the recruitment results of the State Selection Recruitment Board (SSRB) and the Public Service Commission (PSC) in 2009 to government services in the state are some key examples. In Kashmir, there is a growing feeling that disproportionate representation of the Jammu region in the government administrative recruitments is in line with the Kashmir region’s political disempowerment. Such feelings breed religious radicalization.

The contention of regional imbalances in J&K goes back to several decades. It was in 1961 that the

GM Sadiq government was advised by New Delhi to appoint a commission to look into Jammu's grievances of discrimination, which resulted in the formation of the PB Gajendragadkar Commission. It is no secret that the commission's recommendations were politically influenced. One of its core recommendations was the creation of special administrative structures like Regional Development Boards. While most of the recommendations were received with alarm in Srinagar, New Delhi used its influence to ensure they were taken seriously.

In 1965, Karan Singh went a step further by proposing that J&K be 'reorganized' along linguistic (communal) lines, and Jammu be merged with Himachal Pradesh. Back then, this proposal was viewed as an 'extreme' both by New Delhi and Srinagar. The idea died down on its own.

In 1978, Jammu's sense of discrimination took a violent turn when riots broke out in Jammu and Poonch cities. That was the time when certain government recruitments were seen to be unevenly in favour of the Kashmir region. Soon the violence became nasty, targeting a particular ethnic group. In the preventive police action, about eighteen people were killed. With the political heat having become unbearable, the then chief minister, Sheikh Abdullah announced the setting up of yet another commission to inquire into the grievances of discrimination. The commission was headed by a retired Chief Justice, SM Sikri, which, recommended the creation of a State Development Board, chaired by the Chief Minister, something that never materialized.

Since the 1980s, almost all state government departments and agencies have been bifurcated or trifurcated. State-level posts were replaced by division and province-level posts. The reservation for socially backward classes and ethnic groups created further social and political divisions.

Ladakh region, for all practical reasons, became a state within a state. But it is important to recognize that the region's separatist tendencies have their roots in early 1949 when its rulers proposed Ladakh's direct incorporation into the Indian Union.

It is true that some rulers from the Kashmir region in the past have not acted too sensitively to the needs and aspirations of some of the people of

Jammu and Ladakh. However, it is equally true that Jammu and Ladakh regions have always had New Delhi's political and administrative favours on their side. Such proximity and special favours from New Delhi to Jammu and Ladakh have bred feelings of psychological and political siege among Kashmir's civil society and political leadership; a feeling reinforced with each passing day.

Delimitation of Assembly Constituencies

For many years now, parties like the Congress, BJP, Jammu State Morcha and the Panthers Party in Jammu have been vociferously advocating the delimitation of the existing assembly constituencies. They argue that Jammu region is "under-represented" in the State Assembly – with Kashmir having 46 Assembly constituencies and Jammu, 37.

In April 2002, the J&K Legislative Assembly adopted an amendment to the Jammu and Kashmir Constitution freezing any delimitation exercise till 2026. The Election Commission in 2008 also made it clear that there would be no delimitation of electoral constituencies in J&K before 2026. Sadly, most of the political parties in J&K view the delimitation issue from narrow political prisms, rather than through the perspective of identity and rights. When the Congress party fought the 2001 assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir, its election manifesto promised a Delimitation Commission, which would be set up in the state through a constitutional amendment to hammer out new electoral constituencies based on the 2001 census.

For demystifying the delimitation debate, it is important to analyze the demographic data of the state. As per the 2001 census figures, the population in Kashmir province is 54.76 lakh and in Jammu, 44.3 lakh. Jammu's population includes around 1.5 lakh Kashmiri Pandits, who are enrolled as voters in Kashmir and not in Jammu. As such, Kashmir has around 1.3 million people more than in Jammu, if one includes Kashmiri Pandits in the total population in the Valley.

There are ample examples to substantiate this argument. Jammu and Kashmir's chief electoral officer BR Sharma recently made a significant statement when he said that the latest revised electoral rolls show that the number of voters in Kashmir is 32 lakh and that in Jammu around 30 lakh. In 11 assembly segments in Jammu, 94,000 bogus voters were found and their names deleted. It

was, however, not explained why Kashmir, despite having nearly 1.3 million people more than Jammu, had only about 2 lakh more voters.

It is common knowledge that an unspecified number of eligible voters in Kashmir are not registered either due to their disinterest in the democratic process or administrative lethargy. Whatever be the case, by modest estimates, no less than a million voters in Kashmir are missing from the electoral rolls, even if one takes the 2001 census figures as the base line data.

While there is no doubt that all primary data is collected by the local members of the local government administration, there are many missing links between the Census Department and government manpower in terms of co-ordination, training, geographical coverage, logistics and data consolidation. After data collection, all compilation and analysis takes place at the central level.

Basically, as per the J&K Constitution, census should have been a state subject. It is quite surprising that there is not a single Muslim member in the Task Force on Quality Assurance, which is responsible for the final clearance of census data for J&K. Even more surprisingly, the J&K census department has almost no role to play in the analysis and validation of such data. The problem is that data processing includes what the Census Department calls the process of "internal consistency, comparison with similar data in the past and also validation with likewise data." And it is here that the problem lies. The trend of demographics having been established during the past census operations in J&K is reflected in almost every new census.

Decimation of the Jamaat-i-Islami

The decimation of one of Kashmir's main religious political parties, the Jamaat-i-Islami, during the insurgency era has been a significant political process. On the one hand, some of its cadres' embrace insurgency, and eventual neutralization saw a significant erosion of its political structure. On the other, the erosion of its cadre base and grassroots presence gave a fillip to the emergence of other religious groups like the Jamiat-i-Ahlihadees. All this has had two significant ramifications for Kashmir. There is one perspective which views the political ideology of groups like the Jamaat-i-Islami as more accommodative than that

of groups like the Jamiat-i-Ahlihadees. The other views the decimation of the Jamaat-i-Islami as having sealed its capacity to create another grassroots-base and mobilize students in the near future.

Post-9/11, most of the cross-LoC radical political affiliations and insurgent networks have been severed. Many of such networks, mainly consisting of Lashkar-i-Taiba, Jaish-i-Muhammad and other such organizations and their over ground offshoots had started importing ideologies which were mostly alien to Kashmir.

The Kashmiri Pandit Factor

Generally, the Kashmiri Pandit community has been a tolerant and accommodative community of people. However, over the last few decades, the emergence of radical Kashmiri Pandit groups, like Panun Kashmir, which espouses radical political and religious ideologies, has changed the perception of the community. The group's political ambition of creating an isolated and separate homeland within Kashmir Valley remains a radical agenda, which has the potential of stirring reactionary radical responses from Islamist groups in Kashmir. This agenda also serves to draw parallels with the Palestinian issue, making Kashmir's political question acquire increasingly religious overtones. Any further delay in an honourable return of the Kashmiri Pandits to their original homes and their assimilation with the majority Muslim community holds the potential for further radicalization among both the communities, fuelled by reactions and counter reactions.

The Sangh Parivar Factor

The patronage that certain religious communities in Jammu and Kashmir have received from radical religious groups like the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), Bajrang Dal, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has also served to radicalize certain sections among the Hindu community. This patronage has also created reactionary forces among Muslims in the Kashmir Valley. Fuelling of regional separatist tendencies has automatically served to further religious radicalization.

In March 2001, the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha of the RSS at Delhi had resolved to support the agitations in Jammu and Ladakh for separate statehood and union territory status. The RSS resolution on J&K, passed at Kukukshetra on 30

June 2002, apart from expressing solidarity with all non-Muslim and non-Kashmiri-speaking ethnic groups' "struggles of assertion," also states, "This resolution is the best way to abolish the divisive Article 370, separate citizenship for State subjects, separate flag, and separate constitution for J&K. It is also the best way to stop lakhs of Pakistanis from settling in J&K through the Resettlement Act." RSS' Uttar Kshetra Sangha, Jitender Veer Gupta's blue print for the "or-organization" offers another interesting insight into this.

Growth of Wahabi Ideology

With the increasing unpopularity of certain practices of Kashmiri Muslims who identify themselves with the Hanafi school of thought, mainly the practices concerning the Sufi shrines, Wahabi ideology is gaining ground in Kashmir. Mosques which would traditionally be run by people of Hanafi thought, highly influenced by the Sufi ways of religious practice, are increasingly being overtaken by Wahabi ideologues. This is happening not only in Kashmir's countryside, but in Srinagar city as well, including the Old City – considered a strong bastion of Hanafi Islamic thought. Although this transition does not necessarily mean outright religious radicalization, it leaves scope for transformation which over a period of time attains a degree of radicalization – both social and political.

On the other hand, the Jamiat-i-Ahlihadees's plan of establishing an Islamic University in Srinagar is seen as a direct response to the Mata Vaishno Devi University established in Jammu by a particular school of Hindu thought.

The Madrasa Phenomenon

Although there is a clear growth in the number and influence of Islamic Madrasas in Kashmir, the fact remains that they are, for most part, politically passive. The emphasis of the educational curriculum in these madrasas is mostly on the teachings of the Quran and Hadith (the traditions of the Prophet of Islam).

Examination of the sample trends in these madrasas suggests that their proliferation does not necessarily translate into religious radicalization, given the nature of their curriculum that generally focuses on individual reformation rather than political Islam seeking political domination.

Extra constitutional Laws and Curbing Peaceful Political Dissent

Excessive reliance on law and order instruments to contain political dissent has also contributed to the growth of religious radicalization in Kashmir. The use of extra constitutional laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Public Safety Act (PSA), and the Disturbed Areas Act, among others only fuel political discontent – which often strays into religious radicalization.

The ramifications of the failure of meaningful political engagement by New Delhi with secular political groups like the JKLF are well known. Despite their renunciation of armed struggle, groups like the JKLF could not translate their bargaining power into any political achievement, thereby strengthening the forces which exhort religious radicalization as the only means to achieve Kashmir's political objectives.

Generally, since the Kashmiri youth have renounced the armed path towards achieving their political goals, there is a greater emphasis on street and internet mobilization. A cursory observation of the internet networking sites makes it clear that this generation regards the juxtaposition of militarization, political domination with religiosity as an attack on Kashmir's distinct political identity and religious character.

Imposition of Section 144, forbidding the right to assembly, has become a part of Kashmir's life. Illegal, undeclared curfews are a routine now. The use of heavy force against peaceful marches has become a standard practice. It is only common sense that when all avenues of peaceful dissent and protest are choked, more radical forms of resistance crop up, including religious radicalization.

Misunderstanding Kashmiri Muslim Monolith

In the debate on the regional and religious radicalization of Jammu and Kashmir, the Kashmiri Muslim monolith pitted against Jammu and Ladakh is often misunderstood. This approach often ignores other realities.

The fact is that the three regions of J&K today stand divided for all practical purposes, except in the official map. The grand Kashmiri political monolith of a secular and inclusive nature already stands defeated. Between and within the three regions, deep

divisions exist today, which are fashioned not only on the basis of regional identities, but also radical religious standpoints. Some of these divisions reinforce religious divides; some serve to neutralize them as well.

The fact is that Jammu's Dogra ethnic group and Ladakh's Buddhists are pitted against the Kashmiri-speaking Muslims. The Muslim Pahari ethnic group is at odds with the Muslim Gujjars and Bakerwals for political and economic considerations. There are divisions between Sunni and Shia Muslims. There is a certain gulf between Jammu's Hindu Dogra and Hindu Rajput communities. There are political and ideological differences between the Hindu Jammu-Kathua and the Muslim Rajouri-Poonch-Doda belts. Buddhist Leh district and Muslim Kargil district do not share a common Ladakhi vision. Kashmiri-speaking Muslim residents of Doda-Baderwah-Rajouri-Poonch do not necessarily share a common political vision with the Pahari-speaking Muslims of the same areas. Within Kashmir, another divide has evolved over the years: that is the divide between 'well-developed', 'ever-complaining' urban Srinagar and the rest of rural Kashmir.

Amarnath Land Controversy

The Amarnath land controversy, 2008 was a watershed in the state's history. It has created divisions which are hard to reverse and has also given birth to a new wave of radicalization.

Those who were against the land transfer argued that as per government figures alone, in 2008, the number of Hindu pilgrims to the Amarnath cave stood at a record high of 536,000 until 1 August 2008. They also argue that Kashmiri Muslims are publicly committed to host the pilgrims and facilitate the logistical needs for the same. The J&K government is legally committed to make available the best possible arrangements for the Yatra. At the same time, the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB) remains legally empowered as before by virtue of the SASB Act 2002 to autonomously conduct the Yatra. However, an exponential increase in the number of pilgrims beyond the area's carrying capacity, contamination of fresh water sources which feed 80 per cent of Kashmir's drinking water system and hijacking of the Yatra by Hindu right-wing elements have been serious matters of concern.

CONCLUSIONS

From the above narrative, it is clear that religious radicalization in Kashmir has local, regional and international political dimensions. The most important factor which fuels religious radicalization is the political disempowerment felt by the Kashmiris. Controversial acts like the 2008 Amarnath Land Transfer have also been responsible for fueling radical tendencies.

However, as seen from the above narrative, there has been a decline in the systematic and organized radicalization over the last two decades. An inclusive and syncretic Kashmir requires a political settlement of the Kashmir dispute and reversing state policies which fuel communal divisions rather than regional and ethnic empowerment.

References

- Swami, Praveen. 2000. "The game of numbers." *Frontline* 17(21). 14-27 October.
- Kishor Kant Dr. Balram Misra, Indraprastha Vishwa Samvad Kendra, Delhi, *Reorganisation of Jammu & Kashmir*
- Alastair Lamb, *Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy*
- Datar, Arvind P. 2004. "J&K: Legalised discrimination." *The Hindu*. 26 March.
- Upadhyay R. 2001. "Jammu & Kashmir: Is Trifurcation a Viable Solution?" Paper No. 211, South Asia Analysis Group. 16 March. Available at <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers3%5Cpaper211.htm>. Accessed on ???
- Kumar, Bishan. 1999. "The Regional Riddle." *The Indian Express*. 14 April.
- "Jammu & Kashmir: Will delimitation exercise take place in J&K?" *Central Chronicle*. 5 October 2009. Available at <http://www.centralchronicle.com/viewnews.asp?articleID=16115>.