Proposed Hill Council for Kargil: A Shadow of Breakdown of Syncretic Kashmiriyat in the Valley

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Disquiet at Home, War Clouds on the Horizon

Recent events in India and our region have caused disquiet among all those who desire settlement of every outstanding problem through dialogue or judicial intervention and yearn for subcontinental peace and cooperation.

The Vajpayee Government’s plea for an early hearing of a petition before the Supreme Court relating to the status of the ‘undisputed’ part of the acquired land at Ayodhya was per se unobjectionable if only it had not also pleased for vacation of the Apex Court’s interim stay order, passed last year during a fresh eruption of the Ayodhya crisis, prohibiting any puja on that same part of the acquired land. Vacation of the stay order is being viewed by knowledgeable sources and informed circles as the BJP dispensation’s first step towards handing over that land to the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas for construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya. If that gets done through a conspiracy of circumstances the entire judicial exercise with regard to settlement of the title deed of the site where the Babri Masjid stood prior to its demolition on December 6, 1992 (that is, the ‘disputed’ area at Ayodhya) will be rendered meaningless since the Nyas, having started temple construction all around the ‘disputed’ area, will exert maximum pressure to get the ‘disputed’ part also within the temple’s ambit, thus leaving the judiciary with a fait accompli. This indeed is a serious matter and the Union Government can definitely be accused of playing mischief with the objective of undermining the judicial process. The implications of the step the Vajpayee administration is taking are undoubtedly grave, and it is heartening to find some of the B’hai allies in the NDA, notably the TDP and Samata Party, voicing their objections to this move having shared the concerns conveyed in these columns. What eventually they can and/or would do is, of course, difficult to speculate at this juncture but their apprehensions cannot possibly be brushed aside by the big brother who would rather not risk riding roughshod over their sentiments at this particular point in time.

The latest developments on the Indo-Pak front—the expulsions of the Charge d’Affaires of both the missions in New Delhi and Islamabad in particular—have resulted in Indo-Pak ties touching a new low. The charge of the Acting High Commissioner handing over a large sum as nazarana (token offer) to a Hurriyat operative at the Pakistan High Commission cannot be taken lightly in case that is proved in a court of law. Yet one hopes this does not lead to further deterioration of Indo-Pak relations already under severe strain. Incidentally, seasoned Indian diplomats, while advocating stringent action against the mili/ regime in Islamabad, have urged for restoration and maintance of people-to-people contacts. Such a step is imperative if the fundamentalists in the Pakistani polity are to be kept in check. However, if the BJP is bent on using the anti-Pakistan card (which the fringe elements want to convert into an anti-Muslim weapon) for reaping electoral dividends a la Gujarati in the coming State Assembly poll, that is a different matter. But then that game of the principal ruling
PROPOSED HILL COUNCIL FOR KARGIL

A Shadow of Breakdown of Syncretic Kashmiriyat in the Valley

KUNAL GHOSH and VIKAS KUMAR

An interesting feature of the recently concluded J&K Assembly elections (October 2002) was the pathetically low turnout in the urban centres of the Kashmir Valley, such as Srinagar, Anantnag and Sopore, which is in sharp contrast to the large turnout in the rural areas. What explains this paradox? We call this a paradox because the security in the urban centres was far better than that in the rural areas. Why was the urban populace of the Valley cold to the landmark elections? Perhaps they were disillusioned, some would say, with the whole thing because in the past all such exercises had turned out to be a sham. But the rural people in the Third World always have more legitimate grievances than the urban populace, which enjoys a higher standard of living than the former. This is truer if one is talking about a place like J&K that has been under the shadow of terrorism for over a decade now. So one has to look elsewhere for an explanation of this paradox. One major difference between urban and rural Kashmir is language. While the rural Kashmiri speaks primarily the Kashmiri language without which Kashmiriyat would become extinct, the urban Kashmiri speaks fluent Urdu. The attitude of urban Kashmiris to the Kashmiri language is all the more puzzling in the light of the fact that Kashmiri is one of the 18 languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and the language has a repertoire of Sufi poetry composed over six centuries and last but not least it is one of the remaining links with the rich pre-Islamic heritage of the State. This attitude has resulted in the near disappearance of Kashmiri from the public sphere—media, education, and administration—and if the process of decay of Kashmiri goes on unchecked it shall soon be reduced to a kitchen language.

The Urdu-medium madrasas alongside the government run Urdu-medium schools are to a great extent responsible for this state of affairs. But the credit or the blame of imposing Urdu on a Kashmiri-speaking people goes to the Dogra ruler, Hari Singh. He started the so-called ‘zabri’ school (compulsory schooling) in the Urdu-medium to increase literacy among his subjects, and the democratic dispensation of the last 50 years followed in his footsteps. The Dogras ruled over a linguistically diverse region populated by speakers of Dogri, Kashmiri, Ladakhi, Balti etc., and used Urdu as the lingua franca. In fact, this is a legacy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Lahore under whom the first of the Dogra dynasty, Gulab Singh, was a jagirdar. Ranjit Singh’s subjects were mostly Punjabis—Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus—and Punjabi had a well-developed literature—the scripts of the Sikhs and the Sufi poetry of Bulle Shah and Warris Shah—and a suitable script by that time. Yet Ranjit Singh chose Urdu as his medium of administration. Why he did so, what was his compulsion remain a mystery. But if he had chosen Punjabi in Gurmukhi script as his language of administration, the history of the undivided northwest India might have been different. Whatever may be the linguistic twists and turns in the history of that part of India, the fact remains that today’s urban youth of Kashmir speaks more Urdu and less Kashmiri and he/she is somewhat alienated from the folk ethos of the Valley, which consists of the lilting Kashmiri songs and, sufi poetry, the verses of saints, Lal Ded and Noor-ud-din Noorani, and Hindu-Muslim syncretism. In our opinion, this represents the essence of Kashmiriyat.

Urdu was never central to the Valley’s culturoscope. Even today, as mentioned above, the people in the villages of Kashmir prefer Kashmiri and few understand Urdu. The uneducated in particular hardly follow Urdu, which is not their mother tongue. That Urdu is not the mother tongue of any community of the State became evident in the first session of the newly elected Jammu and Kashmir State Assembly. Some MLAs insisted on taking oath in their mother
tongues—Balwant Singh (Dogri) and Shah Jehan Dar (Kashmiri). The Protem Speaker tried to impress upon them the fact that the rule allows for oath-taking in Urdu, English or Hindi. Their insistence received support from their colleagues. Sensing the mood of the Assembly the Speaker declared:

The members could indeed opt for some language other than Urdu, English or Hindi provided they give advance intimation about this. [The Times India 2002a]

SUNITI KUMAR CHATTERJEE (1961), and in recent times Kunal Ghosh (1994), stressed the need to rejuvenate Kashmiri—the vehicle of Kashmiriyat, the Kashmiriyat of Lal Ded and Sufi Rishis. Unfortunately, till now the sage advice has gone unheard. Those who lament about the sweet Kashmiriyat, both the Muslim elite of the Valley and the Kashmiri Hindus, have done practically nothing to preserve the mainstay of Kashmiriyat—the Kashmiri language. Also the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) of the incumbent PDP-Congress coalition is conspicuously silent on the issue of rejuvenation of the Kashmiri language. (The Hindu 2002a). There's nothing new in the linguistic policy of the present government. It is just following the legacy of Sheikh Abdullah. The then Congress leadership, with many Kashmiris at the helm, is also to be held accountable for this historic blunder. But as it has been rightly said in Hindi and Urdu, Gade hue murdaon ko ukhadne se kya phayda? (one gains nothing by exhuming the past), we would like to concentrate on the present so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

We shall begin with a glance at excerpts from one section of the CMP that talks about regional autonomy.

The Government shall grant full powers to the Autonomous Hill Council for Leh, which has hitherto been deprived of its legitimate powers. Efforts will be made to persuade the people of Kargil to accept a similar Autonomous Hill Council for Kargil. (emphasis ours) [The Hindu 2002a]

The CMP talks about giving full powers to the Leh Hill Council. But there is no such thing as that. There exists the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), which was formed in 1994 for Ladakh, and this includes the districts of Leh and Kargil, in response to the longstanding demand of the people of Ladakh for autonomy.

Here we need to worry about the second part of the seemingly innocuous statement, which promises that the government will try to persuade the people of Kargil to accept a separate Hill Council. Implicit in this is the fact that local populace of Kargil is not demanding separation from the existing Ladakh Hill Council. This attempt to persuade people to accept something, which in the very first place they have not demanded, merits attention. The passage from The Hindu (2002a) quoted above means that the existing Ladakh Council (LAHDC) would be bifurcated, not on popular demand but at the initiative of the PDP-Congress coalition government. The rest of the present article focuses on this aspect of the CMP. Readers may be a bit perplexed about this sudden jump from Kashmir and its Kashmiriyat to Kargil. There is a link between the breakdown of syncretic Kashmiriyat in the Valley and the latest developments in Kargil. The language policy of successive State governments is the link.

We see two major phases in the history of Kargil between 1947 and the 2002 Assembly elections. Kargil, consisting of Kargil and Zanskar sub-divisions, is geographically and culturally a part of Ladakh. Buddhists and Muslims populate the Kargil district. In the first phase Ladakh consisted of a single district called Ladakh. The second phase began with the division of the erstwhile district of Ladakh into Leh and Kargil under the auspices of Sheikh Abdullah after he was reinstated as the State's Chief Minister in the 1970s. While talking about J&K one cannot ignore the Pakistan factor. Towards the end of the second phase we had an undeclared war that Pakistan waged against India in Kargil. It is worth recalling that the locals-both Buddhists and Muslims—extended full support to the Indian forces in their heroic fight. Then last year General Arjun Ray of the Indian Army launched the Sadbhavana Programme in Kargil, a praiseworthy initiative aiming to win people's hearts. [The Times India 2001a]. However, unfortunately as a part of the programme Urdu-medium schools are being opened in the region. Unfortunate, because the people of Kargil are primarily Ladakhi-speakers. A few villages near the western border, which were earlier in the Baltistan of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), and which came into the Indian territory after the 1971 war with Pakistan, are Balti-speaking. Ladakhi is a regional variant of western Tibetan and Balti of Baltistan in turn is a variant of Ladakhi. Kazmi (1996), a citizen of Baltistan (PoK), observes the following on the similarities between Balti and other Tibetan dialects:

Apparently Balti is, at the moment, cut off from its sister-languages of Ladakh but has 80-90 per cent of...
nouns, pronouns, verbs and other literary and grammatical character in common except those few which made their place in Balti afterwards. We can, however, term Balti and Bodhi of Ladakh as separate dialects, but not separate languages. The major problem of the Balti language is that it had to disconnect with its radical centre, Tibet, owing to political divisions and strong religious differences since the last 500 years and even from its immediate neighbour Ladakh for the last 50 years. [pp. 144-145]

While Ladakhi uses a Tibetan-based script the Baltis were persuaded to switch over to what is known as the Persian script in Baltistan, but what actually is the Arabic Nastaliq script, after conversion to Islam? Commenting on the impact of the change of script Kazmi (1996) says:

The Balti language has always been at a disadvantage. As mentioned earlier, it had to change the script from the original to an artificial one (Persian), which never corresponded with the letters and requirements of the Balti with the result that it lost its standard and Tibetan originality. [p. 139]

It should be noted that the Balti language faced problems because of the “strong religious differences” and disconnected relationship with Tibet. Also it suffered due to the “change of script from the original to an artificial one”. Moreover 10-20 per cent of its vocabulary has been replaced. It is a clear case of the Linguistic Exclusion Principle applied in the sphere of religion, as enunciated by Ghosh (1994). What is clear from Kazmi’s discourse is that the languages of Pakistan-occupied Baltistan and Ladakh are hardly different and not Urdu.

It seems that just because the district is Muslim majority, the Indian Army, or whatsoever were the decision-makers, decided for Urdu as the medium of instruction. But why ignore the sizeable Buddhist community of Kargil? This question is inherently flawed because it suggests that the programme has favoured the Muslims. In fact, the language policy of the Sadbhavana Programme has ignored the mother tongue of Muslims and Buddhists alike. It should be noted that language is one of the key identity-markers of a community. Any attempt to artificially change it is equivalent to foisting a new identity on the community. Now when many are rejoicing over the dethroning of the Abdullahs the new government wants to foist separate Hill Councils for Kargil and Leh. On November 2002 Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, the Chief Minister of J&K, spoke at length on Star News on how his government would do justice to all parts of the State—Jammu, Kashmir, Leh and Kargil. There is something new in this statement. What is noteworthy about Sayeed’s statement is the list of parts of J&K. All through the last 50 years we heard about three parts of J&K, namely, Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. But now we are hearing of Jammu, Kashmir, Leh and Kargil. So, Ladakh has been replaced with Leh and Kargil. It should be noted that Leh is Buddhist majority and Kargil is Muslim majority.

There is a movement among the Balti people across the border in PoK for reviving the Tibetan script, which was the script for Balti prior to the imposition of the Persian script. The movement does not stop with script. It also aims at preservation and protection of the rich Buddhist heritage, and syncretism between Shia Islam on one hand and Bon Shamanism and Buddhism on the other. (Khan 1998). The relationship between the Muslims and Buddhists in Ladakh is a shining example of communal harmony. Despite decades of communal crisis in the Valley the Ladakh region has never witnessed any communal flare-up; in fact, both the Muslims and Buddhists have put up a united front against the oppression from the Valley because they see their future intertwined. All over the world, election time is when divisions get emphasised but in Ladakh region Puri (2002) notes, the difference between the leaders of the Buddhists and Muslims, the two predominant communities in the region, are narrowing down.

The Ladakh Buddhist Association, an organisation campaigning for autonomy from Srinagar, floated the idea of a Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) few weeks before the elections and within no time leaders of various political parties and organisations agreed to join the front including the Ladakh Muslim Association and the local units of the Congress and BJP. Later, the National Conference decided against fielding its candidate against the LUTF candidate. Independent candidates, both Muslim and Buddhist, withdrew their candidature in support of the LUTF.

In short, the support for the LUTF cuts across the boundaries of parties and religion. (The Hindu 2002b). Now, in the light of the above a question arises: What is the need to form a separate Hill Council for Kargil? Is there any threat to the people of Kargil from the people of Leh? The Chief Minister is talking of justice for all regions of the State and for that he thinks he should divide the existing Hill Council of Ladakh. This would be like talking of doing justice to the people of Doda (Muslim majority) and the rest of Jammu (Hindu majority) by dividing the existing Jammu. Since M. M. Sayeed proposes a separate Hill

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Council for Kargil, the question about the language for the Hill Council would arise sooner or later. Presumably, the incumbent coalition wants it to be Urdu as did the Army Generals when they launched the above mentioned Sadbhavana programme.

Right now we have reasons to cheer because the Assembly elections have reaffirmed the faith of the people of Jammu and Ladakh in the secular regional identity of their regions. However, the government must take note of the fact that appointing someone from Jammu as the Deputy Chief Minister (Mangat Ram Sharma) or someone from Ladakh (Nawang Rizgin Jora and Haji Nissar Ali) as a Minister is not the end or the solution of the problem caused by decades of regional imbalances in the State. The government has to go beyond such tokenism.

One of the first proposals discussed by the new Cabinet of the State is concerned with universalisation of education and opening 840 new schools and recruitment of 1680 teachers for the goal. (The Hindu 2002c). Let us hope that in these schools children will be taught in their mother tongues—Dogri, Kashmiri and Ladakhi. We hope that the new government would take note of the popular urge for unity in diversity as expressed in the recent Assembly elections and facilitate building of bridges between communities in Jammu and Kashmir. We end with the hope that the government will reverse its declared intention and not partition Ladakh along religious lines to create two separate Hill Councils for Leh and Kargil.

Postscript

Since this article was penned a new development has taken place. The coalition Government of Jammu and Kashmir announced that a separate Hill Council for Kargil would come into force by June 30, 2003 (The Hindu 2002c). According to Chief Minister Mufti M. Sayeed’s order, the Chief Executive Councillor of the LAHDC will have the status of a Cabinet Minister, while the other Executive Councillors will have the status of a Deputy Minister only within the Leh district. The sting is in the tail. Ladakh consists of two districts—Kargil and Leh—and yet the Councillors of the LAHDC will be denied ministerial status in the Kargil district. (The Times of India 2002a). The Mufti mischief is at work again. In the name of granting more powers he is actually curtailting the territorial jurisdiction of the LAHDC. He is saying the Kargil district of Ladakh is off-limits for the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC). Ladakh is a well-defined territory in the map of India, and the Mufti’s order is ultra vires with the law of the land. It should be challenged in a court of law. Sheikh Abdullah divided Ladakh along religious lines into two districts—Kargil and Leh. Now Mufti Sayeed is trying to deepen this division further by announcing a separate Hill Development Council for Kargil. The two parts of his order taken together amount to redefining Ladakh to consist of a single district called Leh. His order is illegal. Apart from contesting it on legal grounds, all secular parties should challenge his order politically. Mischievously Mufti Sayeed has laced his order with sugar by handing out the Councillors of the LAHDC a lot of perks and status. They too seem to have fallen for it.

FOOTNOTE

1. In another development that augurs well for rejuvenation of the Kashmiri language Bap—the first Kashmiri language film to be produced after a gap of four decades—was released in Jammu on December 6, 2002. The film, directed by Jyoti Swaroop, was made with the support of the National Film Development Corporation. Based on the 1989 Wandhama carnage, the first incident of mass killing of the Pandit community by the Islamic terrorists in the decade-old violence in the State, Bap has already won the Nargis Dutt Award for National Integration and has made its presence at the Cannes Film Festival in France. (The Hindu 2002d).

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result of the closure of industrial units, and the new entrants to labour market, unable to find placements in the organised sector, have been swelling the ranks of the labour force in the informal or the unorganised sector. Now there also, it seems, they are not going to be allowed to eke out a living. We have some indications to this effect. The Christian Science Monitor (January 6, 2003) reports that foreign contractors have been given the job of removing the garbage in Cairo and they will earn a substantial amount of money from collecting and using recyclable materials. In this process 60,000 “garbage people” will be deprived of their livelihood. In Delhi, the same process is on the way, which will throw 40,000 people including sweepers and rag pickers out of job thus depriving them of their livelihood.

Even though the Survey claims that the incidence of poverty has declined, the rural-urban disparity has widened. As many as 75 per cent of the poor are in the rural areas. Besides, a large number of poor people are confined to only a few States and the progress in alleviating poverty has been uneven across the regions. To quote the Survey, wide inter-State disparities are visible in the poverty ratios between rural and urban areas as also in the rates of decline of poverty. Among major States, Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu had more than 50 per cent of their population below the poverty line in 1983. By 1999-2000, while Tamil Nadu and ,West Bengal had reduced their poverty ratios by nearly half, Orissa and Bihar continued to be the two poorest States with poverty ratios of 47 and 43 per cent respectively in 1999-2000.

States like Bihar, Orissa, UP, Assam and Madhya Pradesh continue to be at the bottom in the ranking on the basis of human development index in 1981, 1991 and 2001. This growing regional imbalance is sure to damage the cause of national integration. One may recall that the removal of regional imbalances was one of the aims of development during the Nehru-Indira Gandhi period. From the Second Five Year Plan onwards special measures were taken to remove regional imbalances, which were a legacy of the British rule. Since 1991, when the Washington Consensus became the anchor-sheet of economic reforms the Nehruvian goals of the removal of disparities in the distribution of income and wealth and of regional imbalances were given a go-by, without realising that this will benefit the forces inimical to the unity and integrity of the country.

It is surprising that the Survey is completely silent over the impact of the Gujarat communal riots on the investment climate. It is an open secret that both Indian investors and their foreign counterparts have voiced their concern over the psychological impact of these riots. In a recent meeting in Mumbai, Indian capitalists voiced their anger and anguish before Narendra Modi. The government may push it under the carpet, but those who have to put in their money have to reckon with it. Moreover, History is not under the command of the government or the Sangh Parivar. It will pass its own judgment.

In the end, it is high time that the Sonia Gandhi-led Congress and Left parties along with other patriotic forces come together to ponder over the ongoing strategy of development and analyse its disastrous consequences. If it is not in the interest of the people of this country, let them work out a comprehensive alternative and mobilise the people to fight for it.