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Kashmir

Rhetoric and Repression

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV338 - March 2002 -

Publication date: Thursday 7 March 2002

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While the war rhetoric from the Indian and Pakistan governments continues, it is important to note that, since 1947 when British rulers left the subcontinent transferring power to the local bourgeoisie and creating two nations on the basis of religion, India and Pakistan have fought three full-fledged wars and a mini-war in 1999.

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Each time the campaign of misinformation launched by the media has projected the Kashmir question as a property dispute between sub-continental neighbours, increasing the Hindu-Muslim divide, creating religious frenzies. Instead, it is a question of the right to self-determination of the Kashmiri people.

Kashmiris consider that their subjugation began, not in 1947 when the last Dogra (Hindu) ruler acceded to India under pressure of circumstances, nor when the Dogra ruler Gulab Singh of Jammu first acquired Kashmir for Rupees 7.5 million and a token rent from the British in 1846, but way back in 1586 when the Moghul Emperor Akbar extended his domain to the Kashmir valley. The majority of people (93% in 1947) were Muslims but power and authority were held by the Dogra elite and the white collar jobs by the minuscule Hindu Pandits.

The agitation against discrimination of Muslims was earlier taken up by various conservative religious associations (anjumans), but the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference under the leadership of Sheikh Abdullah and others developed the struggle from the point of view of secular Kashmiri nationalism, calling for self-determination for Kashmir and opposing the Muslim League.

As late as 1946, the NC had launched a 'Quit Kashmir' movement intending to overthrow the tyrannical ruler. At the time of partition in 1947 during the massive exodus across the border of Hindus and Sikhs into India and Muslims into Pakistan, Muslims in Jammu were attacked and killed with the suspected collusion of the Hindu rulers. So, the Muslims of the Poonch region bordering Pakistan revolted and initially the tribal raiders from North-West and then the Pakistani Army entered Kashmir to aid the rebels, later themselves indulging in indiscriminate loot, pillage, rape, arson and murder.

The king signed the instrument of accession (October 26, 1947) with India at this juncture, conceding authority to the Indian Union only in matters of defence, external affairs and communication, and clearly stating in the agreement that the consent of the people of Jammu and Kashmir (J & K) was to be sought before the accession became final. That consent has not been obtained by India till now. The cease fire obtained at the Line of Control through UN interventions divided Kashmir into Pakistani Occupied Kashmir and J & K on the Indian side.

Power

The NC leader Sheikh Abdullah was appointed as Prime Minister, to share power with the king and was supposed to 'deliver goods', that is, help in making the accession final. But one of Sheikh Abdullah's early tasks was the abolition of jagirdari and chakdari rights (feudal land rights), leading to the resumption of 400,000 acres of land belonging to a mere 9,000 landlords. In order to break the Dogra monopoly over arms, a militia was raised in the Kashmir valley. A debt control law was promulgated to curb the powers of money lenders. Since the majority of landlords, military officers and money lenders were Hindu and upper caste, they and right wing Indian leaders raised the cry of Hindus being in danger.

Meanwhile, the Indian Constituent Assembly drafted Article 370, to deal with India's relationship with J & K, where, while giving a special status to it, in fine print it reneged from the guarantee of ascertaining the will of the people of Kashmir, making it easier to bring it into the orbit of Indian Union. The right wing Hindu communalist organizations Praja Parishad and Jana Sangh had started vigorous agitation for 'integration' of Kashmir into India. Karan Singh of the hated ruling family (ab) used his position to refer the act of land reforms without compensation to the President of India, pressurizing Abdullah further. In this troubled situation, the entrance of the Jana Sangh president, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, into the Kashmir valley, his arrest and subsequent death provided enough opportunity to get rid of Abdullah. He was arrested on August 9, 1953 and was kept imprisoned for a number of years.

Pliable

All these years having pliable governments with 'democracy' through terror and intimidation, the constitution of J & K was changed beyond recognition, reducing J & K statutorily and constitutionally to the status of other states in India. India's major concern in Kashmir then or later has never been either democracy or secularism but Indian nationalism and geo-strategic requirements. Thus, while Abdullah and his colleagues like Beg were kept imprisoned for years, and the Plebiscite Front repeatedly barred from contesting the elections, and secular and democratic parties like PSP were condemned for trying to operate in J & K, the communal forces were not resisted politically.

Indeed, Jamaat-I-Islami was encouraged to contest elections and was 'allowed' to win a few seats. In 1995, a report by eight human rights organizations from various parts of India entitled 'Blood in the Valley' confirmed the continuation of the same policy. The report argues that while the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front and its leaders are disliked on both the sides of the frontier for their stand in favour of an independent, secular Kashmir, not only the government of Pakistan (openly) but the government of India also (covertly) encouraged the Hizbul Mujahideen "by targeting the JKLF in its crack down and allowing HM to attack and decimate its rival".

India has been successful in showing that the enemy is fundamentalist and pro-Pakistani and not Kashmiri Nationalist. Obviously, Pakistan is interested in such a scenario. In 1990 Jagmohan, then the governor of J & K, played a role in organizing the flight of the hapless Pandits from the valley. He clearly told Balraj Puri that Hindu-Muslim unity in Kashmir would demoralize the army. In other words, the army was being told that Kashmiri Muslims were the enemy. The military response to militancy has been terribly violent, with estimates of deaths going over 40,000 and of custodial deaths crossing 700 by September 1994 in a report by Amnesty International. Amnesty recorded 70 deaths in custody and extra judicial killings in the period January to August 2000 alone.

Equally horrific are the figures of killings by militants. Between 1988 and 1998 29,151 civilians and 5,101 security men were killed. And for those who say that Hindus are in danger, more Muslims are among civilians killed (2,092 Muslims out of 2,488 civilians killed between 1990 and 1994). The richer Muslims have made alternative arrangements elsewhere in India. But ordinary people are suffering the brunt of both militants and military forces. A majority still want freedom but are disillusioned with the militants' violence. People in Pakistani occupied Kashmir are equally devoid of democratic rights.

Political Economy of Kashmir

For the pan-Indian bourgeoisie it is as a captive market for its manufactures that Kashmir is important and not as an area of investment. That is the reason why custom barriers which existed until the arrest of Abdullah in 1953, were the first to be lifted by the puppet government while restrictions on non-Kashmiri ownership of property in Kashmir were left in place, diluting them as and when needed by big capitalists. Medium-scale capitalists resent these

restrictions and demand their removal as part of national integration. Also, like all other Special Category Hill States, J & K does receive a high per capita 'assistance' from Delhi, but in the case of JK alone it is 70% loan and 30% grant, as against 90% grant and 10% loan for other states. And thus the bulk of the annually increasing budget deficit is accounted for by the burden of interest payments to the Central Government. Further, J & K government expenditure is determined by security considerations. One of the major expenditures, building a highway linking Jammu and Shrinagar primarily for military purposes is also the avenue for selling manufactures and for taking Kashmir's timber and other primary products out at a cheap rate, in the classic colonial manner. The power generated in the state was being supplied to meet the needs of Delhi while Shrinagar was without power three days in a week because of a failure to upgrade of transmission lines.

Dismal

At the same time as having dismal records in human development, both India and Pakistan increase their military budgets for their Kashmir adventure. The per day expenditure to protect the 140 km long Line of Control in an ice-laden area is Rs.10 crores (Rs.4.87 crores = US\$1 million). To protect the Siachin glacier India spends Rs. 3.2 crores per day, apart from the regular human loss because of adverse climatic conditions in spite of all possible precautions. Pakistan's defence expenditure for 1998-99 was Rs.145 billion, 4.8% of its GDP. While India's defence expenditure in the same year was Rs. 456.94 crores or 2.31% of its GDP, the amount required to make primary education free and universal in India.

After a mini-war at Kargil in 1999 the defence budget of India for 2000-2001 had a hike of Rs. 15000 crores, though an additional grant of Rs. 8000 crores was already given in November 1999. The sharp hike in allocation was attributed to revamping and giving fresh impetus to the high-altitude warfare, mountain warfare and low intensity warfare, mainly to acquire hi-tech weaponry. The reports of corruption in all these purchases keep coming.

Human cost

The human cost of the Kargil war was much higher than the earlier admitted 410 dead and 594 injured. Apart from the actual war, war mongering takes its toll on human lives, expenditure on movement of forces and displacement of border villagers. The US president's 'War on Terrorism' has given legitimacy to Indian Government rhetoric, but Indian citizens should call on the Indian state to get out of Kashmir. Though the majority of the public under the effect of a regional media full of notions of 'National glory, honour' are for war without understanding its actual implications, a small but growing section is becoming aware of the need to question the positions taken by successive Indian governments.

The Stalinist parties are happy extending unqualified support to the government's stand, considering Kashmir as integral part of India. Only the far left clearly supports the cause of the people of Kashmir.

And though knowing fully well that national boundaries divide the unity of working class, also there are some areas dominated by Hindus and some by Buddhists, which needs to be taken into consideration while solving the problem, it is not the governments of India and Pakistan who have the right to decide, it is the right to self determination of the people of Kashmir.