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An identity for Kashmir

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Introduction

“I am a Kashmiri to whom Kashmir has always been the dearest of treasures, and suffered for it. To me the nationalism of today is nothing but a garbled version of the majority-communalism directed towards a definite end.” (Jia Lal Kaul Lalali quoted in Zutshi, 2004: 318).

Salvaging the Kashmiri culture for the inhabitant of the valley has become the prerogative of a number of ideologies. Indian nationalism claims Kashmiriyat as it's own, as a perennial example of Indian pluralism, it's secular society, where members of all communities used to live side by side in harmony. Pakistan's exclusively religious ideology aims to free the valley's majority culture from Indian attempts at drawing Jammu and Kashmir into its sphere of influence, and from the threat of assimilation by India's majority Hindu population. Kashmiri nationalists romanticise the valley's past under that banner of Kashmiriyat. Some aim to bring back its culture, citizenship rights for the valley's inhabitants, equality among its various communities, and a degree of self-determination – either within the Indian federation or by secession and independence.

This range interpretations, leading to a variety of mutually exclusive conclusions, has prodded some outside observers to consider Kashmiriyat a hollow ideology. Aggarwal (2008) calls it an empty signifier, a constructed reality, reference to which can only obscure the answers to questions about Kashmir's future. Others, among them Zutshi (2004), locate Kashmiriyat in the pre-modern, pre-colonial past of the Kashmir valley. To Zutshi, reference to Kashmiriyat by today's politicians is nothing more than political opportunism, instrumental only as a means to obscure inherently communal or contradictory ideologies. Among other things, contemporary appeals to Kashmiriyat seem to ignore internal differences between the various Islamic communities of the Kashmir valley.

In this essay I intend to trace the history of Kashmiriyat, to locate that oft-quoted identity for Kashmir in the valley's past. With reference to Zutshi's account of identity formation in Kashmir, I'll attempt to show how its pre-modern regional identity changed to become a rallying call for various modernist causes in the valley. I'll show that much of the upheaval and changing relations between communities in the Kashmir valley, at the time of it's conversion from a pre-modern society into its contested identity in a modern-day conflict, is to be expected within theories of modernism, Gellner's foremost among these. After it's been shown that Kashmiriyat isn't merely a constructed concept, but essentially a description of a pre-modern society, I'll be in a position to juxtapose this historic concept of Kashmiriyat with the claims of modernist ideologues in the valley around the time of India's

independence. In the final analysis I will consider the relevance of appeals to regional Kashmiri identities within present-day Jammu and Kashmir. I will thus attempt to answer the question how a regional identity for Kashmir will again be allowed to take root among its violently opposed communities.

An identity for Kashmir

Prior to partition, the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir covered of an area that included Ladakh in the east and the Gilgit Agency ¹, the Kashmir valley and Poonch in the West. Baltistan and Jammu make up the other administrative divisions of Jammu and Kashmir. Since the 1947 partition of Pakistan, and the state's accession to India, the Gilgit Agency and part of Baltistan have formed the Northern Areas of Pakistan. Parts of Poonch and the Kashmir valley, divided along the line of control, make up Azad Kashmir, also in Pakistan. In this essay I'm mostly concerned with the communities and identities of the Kashmir valley. The valley has never been an isolated entity. Its interactions with other areas in the princely state, as well as its connections with the Punjab, play an important role in the development of communities and identities in the Kashmir valley. Nonetheless, it's the identity of the inhabitants of the valley which is mostly contested by India and Pakistan. This fact was highlighted by the Dixon Commission in 1950, which claimed that parts of Jammu and Kashmir could readily accede to either India or Pakistan, without reference to its inhabitants, because a plebiscite would not be hotly contested in these areas. According to this commission, the Kashmir valley is the only administrative division in which a plebiscite could swing either way (Zutshi, 2004: 320-321).

Present-day nationalists refer to the period prior to the paramountcy of Jammu and Kashmir to the British – the Dogra assumed control of Kashmir in 1846 – as the high-tide of Kashmiriyat. It was allegedly a time of harmonious relationships between the Muslim and the Hindu population of the valley. In chapter 1 of his book, Zutshi (idem) describes the pre-colonial period not as one of religious syncretism, but as a time wherein people were very much aware of their religious affiliations. The Kashmiris could nevertheless easily and without contradiction subsume their religious identity under a regional, Kashmiri one. The Kashmiris were able to formulate such a regional identity largely because of outside influences; Kashmir was never the beautiful, 'closed garden' that informed many foreign images of the valley. Rule by outside dynasties – Mughals, Afghans – meant that an external 'other' was always available. What is more, these rulers paid scant attention to

¹ For strategic reasons – the Russian threat to the British empire in the north – the Gilgit agency was under special administration of the British colonial government in India.

the formulation of a regional identity in the valley, much less institutionalise policies that divided Kashmir along communal lines. The conversion of the Kashmiris to Islam in tandem with the expression of a narrative of regional belonging, meant the 'vernacularisation' of Islam in the Kashmir valley; a mystic tradition not unfamiliar to other parts of South Asia (idem: 18). Various Islamic traditions were therefore easily subsumed under a regional identity that also included Hindu, Buddhist and various other traditions. It's only when Punjabi Sikhs took control of the Kashmir valley in 1819 that cracks started to appear in this image of religious pluralism within a discourse of regional identity. The Sikhs instituted anti-Islam policies that would later be adopted part-and-parcel by the Dogra administration. Yet, given that the Sikhs were just another foreign dynasty, Kashmiri regional identity, to which aim vernacular religious identities could be employed, continued to be articulated within the valley.

Not until the turn of the 20th century, when Jammu and Kashmir was ruled by the Dogra state, did identities in the Kashmir valley start to take shape along communal lines. In the literature we find several reasons for the changing identities in Kashmir (Rai, 2004a, 2004b; Zutshi, 2004: chapter 2-4). Firstly, the Dogra court, put in place by the British in 1846, was a local dynasty that nevertheless derived its legitimacy from outside. The Maharaja legitimised its rule by the paramountcy of the imperial power and a heritage that it traced to the Rajputs of India. From a rule by Hindus, Jammu and Kashmir "had become a Hindu state" (Rai, 2004a: 7). Secondly, reform of the political economy precipitated in the rise of a gentry class, initially drawn from the Hindu clerical class because of its ability to speak the language of the civil service. Greater colonial intervention and further land reform at the end of the 19th century did little to alleviate this situation. A powerful landed elite of Hindu and Muslim merchants and manufacturers took root in Srinagar alongside a sedentary, largely Muslim peasant population in the countryside.

The leaders of the gentry class tried to increase their power by laying claim on scarce urban resource. The Muslim elite successfully petitioned the Maharaja to return resources such as shrines and their accompanying land endowments to the local population. These shrines were used by various Islamic denominations to exert their influence among the Muslim peasant population. However, the Dogra continued to frustrate attempts by the Muslim leadership to increase their influence in state policies concerning such areas as language and education. The Pandit population of Srinagar, afraid of losing their preferential access to jobs in the bureaucracy of the state, successfully held off changes to the language of the civil service. Education also played a role herein, as it would have

enabled members of other communities to gain proficiency in the language of the civil service. The British imperial court, which allowed itself a greater say in state politics after it imposed a resident onto the state in 1885, was keen to foster a more inclusive civil society in the valley (idem: 14). Yet the Maharaja, at the behest of the Srinagar elite, managed to subvert calls for state intervention in the system of education. Hence the civil service remained inaccessible for large tracts of the population.

By the time education became more widely available in the first two decades of the 20th century, and awareness of citizenship rights grew among the peasant population, the various interests of the elite lay entrenched along communal lines within the communities and shrines of Srinagar. The Hindu Maharaja had resorted to recruiting Hindi speaking Punjabis to the civil service instead of providing education to the local peasantry. Resentment against the Maharaja among the Muslim gentry, and fear of majoritarian politics among the Pandit population, meant that political identities were quickly taking shape within the communities of the Kashmir valley. Reluctance to play the communal card prevented many leaders from turning to their religious constituencies outright. Even as community leaders claimed to represent a wide cross-section of the Kashmiri population – the late 1920^s saw the first appeal to Kashmiriyat to mobilise against the Dogra state along all classes – more and more people started to express their identity in terms of their religious, not their regional, community (Zutshi, 2004: 209).

Perennial notion or empty signifier?

The issues at stake at this point of the analysis are, firstly, if the development of Kashmiriyat from a pre-modern identity into a modern ideology was a necessary development and, secondly, if antagonism along ethno-religious lines could have been prevented. Ernest Gellner has written extensively about the development of pre-modern, ‘agro-literate’ societies into modern ones. To Gellner, the development of modern societies is not logically contingent, but it is “sociologically necessary in a given historical epoch, that of modernity” (Smith, 2000: 4). Agro-literate societies are characterised by local structures and a self-sufficient, food-producing peasantry. On the other hand, societies characteristic of the modern epoch are of an “industrial, growth-oriented kind” (idem). Such societies have several characteristics in common ².

² I refer here to a summary of Gellner’s theory of nationalism, and Tom Nairn’s development thereof, provided by Anthony Smith (2000: 3-7).

Firstly, modernisation erodes traditional, local structures as people flock to the cities to support the growing gentry class. This urbanisation requires a shared culture among the urban population; culture replaces traditional societal structures. In order to sustain such an urban 'high culture' modernity requires the development of numeracy and literacy fostered through a system of standardised education. In my reading of events, this is exactly what happened in Jammu and Kashmir between 1846 and the 1920s. Land reform initiated by the Dogra state, and further political and economic developments through colonial intervention, resulted in a growing gentry class in Srinagar. In order to sustain a growing bureaucracy more and more people flocked from the countryside into the cities. This peasantry needed to be educated and, as we've seen, education became a topic of contestation among the different factions within the city. Language similarly became a contested item, as neither Urdu nor the Kashmiri vernacular allowed one to enter the civil service. Crucially, the Maharaja continued to support the education of the local Pandit population whilst frustrating the development of schools for the Muslim peasantry, thereby subverting calls from the imperial centre, from where the British called for the fostering of citizenship values among the entire population.

Secondly, Gellner predicts that class conflict arises in modern urban spaces because of competition for scarce resources in the city. What is more, ethnic antagonism is often superimposed on such class conflict (idem: 5). We see the same process take place in Srinagar as well. Competition over scarce resources in Kashmir focussed on shrines and their land endowments. This conflict brought to the fore divisions in the Islamic population revolving around different interpretations of what is meant to be Muslim. The local Pandit population was also implicated in these conflicts. As Kashmiri Pandits felt their claims to preferential access to jobs in the civil service were under threat from increased Muslim demands on the same resources, so they turned to the Dogra state for help. It became increasingly difficult for the different factions in Kashmir to subsume their religious identity under a Kashmiri one. Class conflict in the Kashmir valley took shape along ethno-religious boundaries.

The processes described above lead Gellner to conclude that nationalisms engender nations, not vice versa. I disagree with Gellner's on this point. Tom Nairn, in a development on Gellner's theory of nationalism, argues instead that modern nations and nationalisms appeal to pre-existing nationalities. Nationalisms, it is argued, "found in cultural Romanticism a unifying vehicle for its social and political goals" (idem: 6). This is also how I interpret the appeal to Kashmiriyat by the political leadership in the Kashmir valley in the

third and fourth decade of the 20th century, to which I'll turn shortly. Appealing to the romantic notion of Kashmiriyat, of religious identities subsumed under a regional cause, was a means by which the political leaders in Srinagar obscured their communal demands and the divisions of their constituencies along religious lines. In conclusion it can be said that, contrary to Aggarwal (2008) I don't believe Kashmiriyat to be an empty signifier; it is a valid descriptor of the agro-literate society of the Kashmir valley prior to interventions by the Dogra state and the British, whereby local structures accommodated the subsumption of religious identities under a regional one. Crucially, Kashmiriyat does not refer to a religiously syncretic society, as religious differences were readily harnessed by the various factions of the gentry class when the wave of modernist developments reached the Kashmir valley. What remains to be seen, however, is whether this pre-modern Kashmiriyat can validly be recruited by the modernist ideologies of the political movements leading up to the independence of India.

Kashmiriyat as a nationalist ideology

How then did the various political movements of the 1940^s turn to Kashmiriyat for the formulation of their regional ideologies? At the time of India's independence and the partition of Pakistan the two most influential political movements of Jammu and Kashmir were the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference and the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference. Sheikh Abdullah, who would be a mainstay in Kashmiri and Indian politics for decades to come, founded the National Conference in 1932 (Zutshi, 2004: 229). When it was founded the National Conference was confusingly called the Muslim Conference, only to be renamed the National Conference in 1939. Abdullah founded the National Conference with the financial backing of Punjabi Muslims on a platform of support for education and extension of citizenship rights for the Muslim peasants of Kashmir. He initially enjoyed wide support among the Muslim gentry and peasant classes of the valley. Following the election of the Muslim Conference to the state assembly in 1934, Abdullah's rhetoric increasingly came to be informed by nationalist ideals and 'Kashmiriyat'. This culminated in the renaming of the Muslim Conference into the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference in 1939, in order to dismiss any concerns of communalism.

Throughout the 1940^s Sheikh Abdullah and the National Conference played a very divisive role. On the one hand Abdullah supported the emancipation of the Kashmiri Muslim population while on the other hand he professed a strongly anti-communalist, Kashmiri nationalist ideology. For all its rhetoric, the National Conference never succeeded in gaining support among the Pandit population, who remained suspicious of its communal

affiliations. Ultimately Abdullah never succeeded in subsuming his religious identity under a regional one. The National Conference had also aligned itself with the Congress party and the anti-imperialist struggle in India. Yet the anti-imperialist struggle of the Congress party wasn't a Kashmiri struggle. Kashmir had never known direct colonial rule. The contradictions in this religious-regional-national agenda alienated many Muslim supporters from the party but the National Conference kept up the pro-Congress rhetoric. Abdullah continued to harbour vague ideas of Kashmiri autonomy but never made it clear what he understood by Kashmiriyat and by meaningful self-determination for Kashmir, were the state to accede to a newly independent India. Abdullah remained undecided on the issue of the status of Jammu and Kashmir throughout the partition of Pakistan and Kashmir's accession to India.

Disillusioned with the ambiguous agenda of the National Congress, Chaudhuri Ghulam Abbas, a Muslim hailing from Jammu, broke away from the National Conference to resurrect the Muslim Conference in 1940 (idem: 262). Abbas rejected the all-India agenda of the Congress party outright. Supported by the Muslim League in India, the Muslim Conference nevertheless never subscribed to the idea of an independent Pakistan and Kashmir's accession to it. This policy, combined with a rhetoric of equal citizenship rights for all peasants of Jammu and Kashmir and his aim for an independent nation, made Abbas very popular with Muslims throughout the princely state. Despite slander from the National Conference for its alleged communal values, the Muslim Conference even enjoyed some support among the Pandits population. The Kashmiriyat expounded by Abbas perhaps comes closer to the ideal, pre-modern conception of society in the valley as I described it earlier, a regional identity for Kashmir which subsumes its religious communities on a basis of equality. But even though the Muslim Conference had a clear agenda for the future of Jammu and Kashmir, Abbas was just as incapable as Abdullah of influencing events of 1947.

Zutshi believes that the revivalism of religious identities in Kashmir, in the face of anti-Dogra politics by the National and Muslim Conferences, is ultimately responsible for the province's de facto partition between Pakistan and India (idem: 261). The existence of a strong Muslim voice within the Kashmir valley at the time of partition led to the incursion of tribesmen from Pakistani territory. This violation of the State's territorial sovereignty prompted the Maharaja to turn to India for support, which only heeded his call after the Maharaja had signed the Instrument of Accession. Prior to the Instrument of Accession the Dogra rules had similarly been counting on de facto independence for the territory under

his control. This can hardly be ascribed to Kashmiriyat values through. Throughout the 1940s the Dogra continued to turn to their alleged relation with the Rajput and the paramount power of the British to legitimise their control over Jammu and Kashmir.

The future for Kashmiriyat

Abdullah had failed to formulate a clear vision for Kashmiriyat and the future of Jammu and Kashmir within the Indian federation. Abbas' appeal to Kashmiriyat had held some appeal among Kashmiri Muslims as well as its Pandit population, but his platform of Muslim emancipation and religious pluralism in an independent Jammu and Kashmir had backfired in the confusion that surrounded Pakistan's independence from India. When Muslim tribesmen from Pakistan, who had long-standing ties with the population of the valley, came to the aid of the local population, the Dogra quickly turned to India for help. With the signing of the Instrument of Accession the contested status of a divided Kashmir was sealed. In this section I shall consider some of the solutions that have been offered to the Kashmiri stalemate since its division between India and Pakistan in 1947. I will judge these only on their ability to foster values of religious tolerance under the umbrella of a regional identity.

With the signing of the Instrument of Accession India promised the people of Jammu and Kashmir that they'd eventually be able to decide the future status of Kashmir in a regional plebiscite. Snedden (2005) has analysed the history of the promise of a popular vote, and discusses at length the possibilities offered by a plebiscite. The reasons for the dismissal of a vote are manifold. Shortly after the break-up of the Kashmir valley the logistics required to hold free and fair election weren't in place. In the decades that followed Pakistan and India couldn't agree on the terms of a plebiscite and there was no government body that could administer elections across the divided territories. Following the Simla agreement of 1972, India gave up on its promise to refer to the population of Kashmir to determine to future status of the province. The controversy between India and Pakistan was to be solved bi-laterally. However, both India and Pakistan have always precluded the possibility of an independent Kashmir while the Kashmiris, so concludes Snedden (idem: 86), would likely have opted for independence had that option remained open. A popular vote with only two options, delivery of the state in its entirety to either Pakistan or India, would therefore not have been acceptable to everybody within the Kashmir valley.

There may have been a window of opportunity following the events in 1947, but it's similarly doubtful that an independent nation of Jammu and Kashmir would be able to

foster a cohesive regional identity following the decades of strife after 1947. Tensions between the various communities have only exacerbated the communal identities that already existed prior to the division of Kashmir. Hoenig (2003: 18-19) describes the feelings of insecurity and trenchant suspicion following years of conflict and violent suppression. In the years since 1947 an exodus of Kashmiri Pandits to neighbouring parts of India has already taken place. Were Kashmir to gain independence after so many years as a disputed territory, even more Kashmiri Pandits, afraid of communal violence and Muslim majoritarian rule, would undoubtedly leave the state for India. Independence at the present time would thus preclude the possibility of a return to regional values and instead encourage majoritarian 'rule-by-Muslim'. Accession to Pakistan is similarly out of the question. The regional identity that existed in the Kashmir valley prior to the rise of a communal discourse – the subsumption of religious identities under a regional umbrella – cannot be maintained under a central government that legitimises itself by means of its religious identity, the Two-Nations theory that lies at the heart of Pakistani nationalism.

In my opinion the only solution lies in a measure of autonomy and genuine self-determination for Jammu and Kashmir within the Indian federation. The autonomy that the state supposedly enjoys through article 370 of the Indian constitution has steadily been eroded due to pro-India governments put in place by rigged elections (idem: 76). But precedents do exist for genuine self-determination within the Indian federation. Kohli (2002) tries to answer the question if a democratic India can accommodate ethnic nationalism within its territorial boundaries. He uses a model of escalating and subsiding violence (an 'inverted U-model') to describe the 'life' of secessionist movements as these become more assertive in their demands. The fate of such movements reflects the political context, but given certain characteristics the violence levels off. When an agreement on regional autonomy and self-determination is reached tensions subside and the new identity is incorporated within the Indian federation (idem: 293-295). The paramount characteristics that allows for tensions to be defused and an agreement to be reached are a well-institutionalised central authority and an accommodating leadership strategy. Kohli provides examples in the cases of Tamil and Sikh nationalism. Greater autonomy over decisions concerning the status of Tamil language and culture caused tensions to rise in Tamil Nadu. When the central government relaxed its attitude and an agreement over the autonomy of the state had been reached, peace returned to the region. Similarly, under the unaccommodating leadership of Indira Gandhi violence erupted in the Punjab, yet the

tensions subsided as Rao took a more accommodating attitude towards calls for greater regional autonomy (idem: 306).

A genuine measure of autonomy and regional identity may similarly be reached for the state of Jammu and Kashmir (idem: 312). The politics of Tamil Nadu and power sharing in the Punjab provide relevant examples for a revival of a regional identity in the Kashmir valley. In the early nineties tensions rose over the contested status of Kashmir, but the Indian government had been particularly unaccommodating to calls for increased regional autonomy. The exacerbating communal tensions within Jammu and Kashmir may not spell a lot of good for the genuine power sharing between the various communities within the valley. However, provided clear levels of autonomy and power sharing are put in place, the national government could ensure the safety of all people in the state while regional ideologies build confidence among the population. A lull in the violence and the articulation of a genuine regional identity could put flesh to the bones of Kashmiri nationalist who appeal to Kashmiriyat in their call for greater self-determination for the province of Jammu and Kashmir. Under the auspices of the central government religious communities can assert their demands, all of which can then be accommodated within a larger, regional framework. What would be required from the Indian government is a genuine willingness to share power with the regional government.

Conclusions

For the moment it seems that Kashmiriyat, that particular blend of religious pluralism and regional specificity, didn't survive the conversion of the territory of Jammu and Kashmir to a modern civil society. The post-colonial world has all too often been divided along ethnic and religious lines, the partition of Pakistan is only a most vivid example thereof. It seems that this is something which modernism asks of its subjects, to draw sharp lines along ethnic and religious boundaries before levels of power sharing and autonomy can be reached. Contrary to many references to Kashmiriyat I would claim that history belies the fact that Kashmiriyat is a hollow, constructed concept. But it's not the syncretic religious identity that it's often made out to be. I've tried to show that Kashmiriyat acknowledges religious differences and allows different religious communities to exist under a 'regional umbrella-identity'. Yet Kashmiriyat hasn't fared well in the modern age. With the invasion of the Kashmir valley by modernist ideas about citizenship and the structuring of society different classes laid claim to various resources. These classes took shape along pre-existing communal lines, religious identities were converted into political constituencies and the regional Kashmiri identity became itself the site of contestation.

The international context and Kashmir's schizophrenic identity on the border between two diametrically opposed nations – Pakistan and India – has not aided in the resolution of the conflict that has enveloped the former princely state since 1947. With the current levels of communal strife I do not believe that pre-modern regional values could be resurrected in an independent Kashmir. In the current circumstances such a nation's politics would undoubtedly become an arena for religious conflict and majoritarian rule. The diffusion of tension and the rebuilding of trust can only happen under the auspices of a central government that maintains a peaceful environment without interfering much in the direction of state politics. Pakistan's explicitly religious nationalism cannot accommodate such a process within its borders, yet examples have shown that a measure of regional autonomy can be accommodated within India. Only an unambiguous demarcation between the responsibilities of the regional and the national government could provide the precarious balance that is necessary to allow pluralistic ideologies to assert itself and trust to be built between religious communities in Kashmir. The carp in the pond of this solution is the international context. So long as the sovereignty of Kashmir is in contestation, mistrust of the predominantly Muslim population of Kashmir will prevent the Indian government from sharing some of its power with regional Kashmiri voices.

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