

OPINION

In Kashmir, Extremism is the Real Enemy

Nyla Ali Khan*

The growth of nationalism or an autonomous Kashmiri identity doesn't necessarily have to be pursued through a politics that supports obscurantism or deliberately prevents spread of knowledge and information. The identity of a state or a nation cannot be built just on an unquenchable hatred towards the other and should, certainly, not be constructed by cashing in on the other's pain and grief. It is or, at least, it should be inconceivable, in the day and age of a global economy, to spurn reason and ethics from one's politics. In a society as diverse as ours, the perpetuation of a politics that emphasizes cultural myopia and mono-cultural identities would prove to be only a bane of our existence, and may lead to intolerance, arbitrary justice, tyranny, and ignorance. The contemporary

political discourse in the State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), particularly in the Kashmir Valley, doesn't have to be limited to the framework of the two-nation theory. Nor should dissatisfaction with policies of Indian and Pakistani governments encourage glorification of reactionary politics. The rise of Taliban ideologues in any guise is the last thing J&K needs right now. A lot of Kashmir observers, including academics and career diplomats, tend to reduce the conflict to just a dispute between India and Pakistan over sharing of Indus basin waters. I observed this first-hand during a discussion following a presentation delivered in May 2012 at Salisbury University, Maryland. Another tendency among observers is to see the issue only in terms of the religious-secular binary. There is a

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new breed of writers in the Subcontinent, particularly in Kashmir, who, erroneously, labour under the delusion that J&K has been a haven for pan-Islamism well before the partition of India. This view is completely anachronistic. Interpreting the issue through the above mentioned lenses alone is problematic because it obliterates the legitimacy of regional political aspirations across party, religious, cultural, and linguistic lines. Take the case of this British-Indian academic who once labeled me as an "Islamist," after I wrote an article on the autonomous status of J&K. Probably, he was thinking about autonomy only in religious terms, and not along political lines.

Such criticism has not deterred me from expressing my views on the Kashmir issue. At this juncture, I cannot emphasise enough how foolish it would be to ignore religious, provincial, and sectarian violence, or the growing obscurantism in either India or Pakistan. This will not bode well for a peaceful resolution to the Kashmir dispute. Similarly, the sanctioning of extremist political and religious ideologies in either of the two countries will prevent progress on the issue. Sloganeering, rabble rousing and seeking constitutional

amendments are all okay, but the real test of these activities will be in terms of their impact on institutions. This applies to most places rife with political instability. For instance, after reading a recent essay of mine on the issue, my editor pointed out that, "the constitutional victories gained in Egypt and Tunisia have brought the same concern to mind." In short, the disappointments that Kashmiris have had to face over the years shouldn't dilute democratic aspirations. And extremist ideology must, at all costs, be kept at bay.

In 2008, Benazir Bhutto's widower Asif Ali Zardari had claimed to be agonised by the strained state of relations between the two nuclear powers in the Indian subcontinent. While emphasising the importance of creating bonhomie between the two countries, Zardari had said that the resolution of the Kashmir conflict could be placed in a state of temporary suspension, for future generations to work out. The current Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, seems to have mastered the art of turning volte face on Kashmir issue. Things look no better on Indian side either. No substantive measure has been taken by Indian governments following that of Atal Bihari Vajpayee to initiate a composite peace process with Pakistan. Efforts at the "Quiet

Diplomacy” by one-time Indian Minister for Home Affairs, P. Chidambaram, remained intermittent and interspersed with pugnacious responses by the Indian government to regional demands for greater autonomy. A resolution to the Kashmir imbroglio requires an unprecedented and strong political will from leaders, policy makers, and civil society members on both sides of the Line of Control. Alongside, we need to remember that democratisation is an evolutionary process and there are no instant solutions for it. And to further this process, it is important to respect the pluralistic regional, religious, cultural, and linguistic ethos of J&K.

Towards this end, it is important to ensure accountability of state actors, including those elected by the people. This will bring transparency in the affairs of state institutions. It is equally important to find ways for accountability of non-state actors as they too seek to climb their way to the echelons of power. Although the sufferings of the people of J&K cannot be brushed off, the bitter truth is that it is time to summon courage to initiate a politics of construction. A fragmented society cannot accomplish anything, either politically or socio-economically. Can we begin the process of developing a cohesive society with coherent state policies? ■

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