

# Jammu and Kashmir crisis threatens Indian Subcontinent's stability

by Ramtanu Maitra

With less than two weeks left before millions of Indians exercise their franchise for the ninth time since India's independence to elect a representative government, parts of India are undergoing convulsions. Violent riots involving the two dominant religious groups, Hindus and Muslims, have taken place in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Gujarat, and Jammu and Kashmir. While these riots are sporadic and incidental, due to a steady growth of militant Hinduism and the role of opportunistic politicians, the case of the strategically located Jammu and Kashmir is somewhat different. Jammu and Kashmir has been volatile for a long time, with Kashmiri secessionists and Muslim fundamentalists joining hands.

Kashmir, located just south of the Sino-Soviet borders, has remained a disputed territory since 1947 when the British partitioned the Subcontinent between India and Pakistan, and left. The state was one of the 500-odd Indian princely states ruled by feudal kings whose status remained theoretically ambiguous, because the British, prior to their departure, took the view that the rulers were free to accede either to India or to Pakistan. In most of the princely states, the choice was dictated by geographical considerations. But Kashmir was located along the borders of the two newly founded countries, whose birth had brought indescribable misery to millions and institutionalized immense hostility in the process.

Just before the Kashmir Maharaja, Hari Singh, could announce his preference to align with the Indian Union, the state was invaded from the west. The Pakistani invaders, dressed in tribal attire, were eventually stopped by Indian troops, but not before almost half of Kashmir was occupied by the so-called tribals. This part of Kashmir aligned with Pakistan and came to be known as Azad Kashmir, while the other half, under India, came to be called Jammu and Kashmir. Despite prolonged debates in the United Nations and prompt side-takings by the superpowers in the 1950s, the Kashmir issue has remained undecided, and the territory is still under dispute. Neither India nor Pakistan has shown any inclination to give up any part of Kashmir; it remains the most difficult barrier to normalized relations between the two countries.

The dispute over Kashmir has provided ample opportunity to various groups—including the superpowers and Communist China—to fish in troubled waters, particularly in the

Indian part of Kashmir, where the Muslim community is a large majority. Over the years Kashmiri chauvinists seeking to form an independent Kashmir have manipulated the Muslim population, and brought into their fold the fanatic mullahs with the aim of disrupting law and order in the state. In recent years, on a number of occasions, the Indian tricolor was denigrated and the Pakistani flag hoisted to give expression to their solidarity with the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

During the last five years, since the Khalistani secessionist movement in the Indian state of Punjab took a violent turn, Jammu and Kashmir has become the safehouse of Punjabi secessionists fleeing from the Punjab police. There, the Kashmiri secessionists have developed a wide network of anti-national forces, and Indian security forces have less capability. Terrorism in Kashmir, in the form of bank robberies and murders, began long before the secessionist movement in Punjab gained momentum. Events, for example, such as desecration of the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the hanging of Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto by the Pakistani military strongman Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, and the sudden death of Gen. Zia ul-Haq himself, unleashed waves of rioting in Kashmir. In the spring of 1988, when the Ojheri ammunition depot at Rawalpindi, Pakistan, was blown up, Jammu and Kashmir experienced arson and violence.

## Who fishes in troubled waters?

But although the violence in Kashmir often has little to do with any event that occurs *within* Kashmir, incidents are often triggered by the separatists on-the-ground to stage anti-India demonstrations and polarize the population. Kashmir is therefore not simply an India-Pakistan issue. Long before Kashmir became a disputed area, the British rulers had pressured Maharaja Hari Singh to lease the northern part of the state, Gilgit, for 60 years for strategic reasons. Although the lease is now void, the British interest in watching the Chinese and the Russians, *and* Indians and Pakistanis, from a "neutral nation" like Kashmir, has far from waned. It may be no coincidence that top Kashmiri terrorists have found London an effective base of operations.

At the same time, Pakistan has considered Kashmir to be the proverbial feet of clay of the Indian giant. Because of its large Muslim population and mountainous terrain, Kashmir has been considered by all Pakistani leaders to be an ideal

location for subversive actions against India. Every Pakistani leader has sworn to recover Kashmir from the clutches of "Indian infidels," and as late as 1987, the late President Zia ul-Haq was planning a military operation to "liberate" Kashmir from India. It is also widely known that most Kashmiri secessionists travel freely between India and Pakistan through the state's porous borders, and find refuge in Pakistan.

### **Neutrality talks go nowhere**

A recent spate of intelligence reports in India indicates that in the first week of August, an important meeting was held in the Kashmir Center at Rawalpindi—a garrison town in Pakistan under the control of virulently anti-India military officers. The meeting was organized and hosted by Sardar Abdul Qayyum Khan, president of Azad Kashmir. Sardar Qayyum Khan, who worked hard to bring down the late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and became a close associate of President Zia ul-Haq, is now a close friend of Punjab Chief Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif (whose only political identity is that he wants "to dump the remaining Bhuttos in the Arabian Sea"). Sharif has often accused Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of selling Kashmir away to India.

What emerged from the meeting, which was attended by 12 political and religious organizations within Azad Kashmir and a number of secessionist groups, was a clear signal that the so-called liberators are becoming less interested in aligning Kashmir with Pakistan, and instead, plan to carve out an independent Kashmir. The concept is to make this "independent Kashmir" a "neutral" nation along the lines of Switzerland. Reportedly, Hashim Qureshi, a founding member of the Kashmir Liberation Front who achieved notoriety in the early 1970s following the hijacking of an Indian Airlines aircraft to Pakistan, condemned some of the violence allegedly organized by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). "Explosions in buses and bathrooms and causing death and injury to hundreds of innocent Kashmiris can hardly be described as an armed struggle for the liberation of people justifying an expenditure of crores [tens of millions] of rupees by Pak agencies," he is said to have told the gathering.

The depth of Pakistani or other foreign agencies' involvement in Kashmir is difficult to pinpoint. The recent arrest of Shabir Shah, a top terrorist belonging to the so-called People's League faction, at Ram ban, Jammu and Kashmir, which sparked off large-scale arson and looting, revealed that Shah was on his way to Pakistan when he was apprehended. It was also reported that Shah had with him a significant sum of money in both Indian and Pakistani currency.

### **Terrorist-fundamentalist nexus**

Almost a decade ago, in 1980, then chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, the late Sheikh Abdullah, had warned the Jamaat-e-Tulaba, the militant youth wing of the funda-

mentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, to give up its anti-India activities. It was then that the government of India, armed with the information that the Tulaba was being funded by Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, called off an international Islamic Students' Conference organized by the Jamaat and which was scheduled to be held in Jammu and Kashmir. Recent reports indicate that the Jamaat-e-Islami has issued instructions to its own student outfits, such as the Islamic Student League, to carry out their activities independently of groups like the Kashmir Liberation Front "which believes more in the creation of independent Kashmir than in its accession to Pakistan."

The kingpin of the notorious Jamaat organization is Syed Ali Shah Gilani, who was once arrested but released dramatically in 1984. Gilani has consistently eulogized Pakistan and has been promoting secessionism. Gilani's main demand is for a free plebiscite whereby the Kashmiris will be given the option to vote on a referendum on whether to stay with India or accede to Pakistan.

Beside Gilani, two other fundamentalist leaders, Mirwaiz Maulvi Farooq and Mirwaiz Qazi Nissar, are extremely active in fomenting trouble within the Indian state. Mirwaiz Farooq is a nephew of Maulvi Yusuf Shah, who had been actively promoting an independent Kashmir under the Maharaja of Kashmir in 1947. Mirwaiz Farooq has grown in stature significantly in light of the weak political leadership that the state presently offers.

Mirwaiz Qazi Nissar, who enjoys the support of the fundamentalists in the southern part of the state, is generally described as the "Bhindranwale of the valley"—a reference to the Sikh fundamentalist leader who died when Indian troops stormed the Sikh religious temple at Amritsar in 1984. While there is very little difference between Maulvi Farooq and Qazi Nissar, it is said that Farooq equivocates when asked his opinion about the accession to India. Qazi Nissar apparently considers accession to India final, and calls organizations such as the Kashmir Liberation Front "anti-national."

Jammu and Kashmir, because of its strategic location, will continue to remain a trouble spot unless a mutually beneficial understanding, which rules out the formation of an "independent Kashmir," is reached between India and Pakistan. Only then can the threat of terrorists and fundamentalists be negated through the political process and imposition of strict law and order. The present situation, however, does not allow any politician to speak out freely or organize against the terrorists.

Over the years, political forces in the state have become weaker and fragmented, and despite their intentions, many have had to align with the fundamentalists and secessionists to survive. Today the ruling National Conference, a mish-mash of nationalists and chauvinists, is being put under increasing pressure from the militant factions and shows signs of caving in.