

# **Religion, Dialogue and Peace in Jammu and Kashmir**

**Yoginder Sikand**

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Foundation for Universal Responsibility

Of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, New Delhi, India, 2006.

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# Preface

The Scholar of Peace Fellowships awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defense and foreign office practitioners, NGO workers and others. The series WISCOMP Perspectives brings the work of some of these scholars to a wider readership. The monograph *Religion, Dialogue and Peace in Jammu and Kashmir*, the outcome of an academic project undertaken by Yoginder Sikand, is the twenty third in the series of WISCOMP Perspectives.

Traveling through Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, Yoginder Sikand opens conversations with a wide swathe of people belonging to different faith traditions, in an attempt to recover and articulate alternate perspectives on religion, grounded on the lived experiences of ordinary people including women. Simultaneously he critiques intolerance and retrogressive interpretations of religion both by clerics as well as by some people belonging to the different faith traditions. The study is based on the premise that religion is a double edged sword and regressive versions that can be used as tools to stir violence exist side by side with progressive interpretations that can be used as a resource for peace.

While there is no denying that faith moves the lives of millions across the subcontinent, a basic dilemma that has to be addressed squarely is that reconciliation and revenge, and violence and harmony coexist in every major religious tradition and intersect in myriad ways. In introspecting strategies of dialoguing between traditions, the paradox between the spaces for reconciliation and coexistence offered by the cultural and spiritual resources of the different traditions and the simultaneous closure of spaces by a new militarized and organized religiosity needs to be factored in.

This in turn leads to another question – where do we locate spaces for reconciliation and healing? Are these spaces to be found in an anesthetized areligious “secular” space or in an alternative space that does not exclude the spiritual resources and rich inter faith matrix from this part of the world? This calls for considerable introspection. The culture of militant religiosity and the liberal response to this which

allegedly takes the form of what some would call “secular militancy” sometimes feed on each other – consequently the challenge is to break this cycle to find creative spaces for healing and dialogue.

These questions become particularly germane in the context of Jammu and Kashmir whose long legacy of peaceful coexistence as manifested in the spirit of Kashmiriyat did come under threat due to the onslaught of a certain type of religious militarism that had no lineage in the history of the region. When the armed movement in Kashmir came under the influence of foreign groups and mercenaries, the gentle Sufi traditions that played such a central role in promoting inter faith dialogue between people of different communities in Kashmir, was challenged by extremist form of Islam. In the Jammu region extremist Hindu groups fanned the fires of anti Muslim passion while Ladakhi Buddhists instituted a boycott of Muslims that lasted for several years. While acknowledging that these schisms and antagonisms are also overlaid by political factors and recognizing that the crisis in Kashmir is political in nature and is not, as some commentators would have us believe, simply imported Islamic fundamentalism, Yoginder Sikand does point out that the salience of religion in the conflict cannot be denied. In the context of Kashmir, religion has come to define an important aspect of people’s identities, and to that extent cannot be delinked from the ongoing conflict.

Consequently, Sikand argues that there is a “need to bridge gaps, dispel myths and stereotypes and initiate a process of re-humanizing the other.” The “alternate” understandings of religion have to be identified and strengthened, so that it can be used as a resource for promoting “ecumenism instead of conflict”.

The primary sources for this project largely consisted of in depth interviews with different religious heads, theologians, academics, officials of religious and faith based organizations, social activists as well as “ordinary” citizens. Dialogic engagement is integral to the work of WISCOMP. This work represents a bold attempt to retrieve and build on Kashmir’s indigenous powerful historical legacy of shared spaces and syncretic culture that had kept people and communities together in the past. In doing so it indicates the directions that projects of social healing and reconciliation can take.

**The WISCOMP Research Team**

# Introduction

The political status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir has been under dispute for more than half a century now. Several wars have been fought between India and Pakistan over the territory, and in the ongoing violence that began in 1989 several thousand people have lost their lives. Religion plays a central role in shaping discourses related to the Kashmir conflict. For some Muslims it is a *jihad*, a struggle between Islam and ‘disbelief’, a war between pious Muslims and ‘disbelieving’ ‘infidels’. Similarly, for some Hindus, the war is a religious struggle to protect ‘Mother India’ and for the cause of the Hindu *dharma* against what are seen as its ‘enemies’. Religion and religious commitment, for many people, are non-negotiable things, and the salience of religion in shaping how the Kashmir issue is defined and understood makes the conflict even more intractable.

Every religion can be interpreted in diverse and often mutually contradictory ways to support a range of different political projects. How a religion is interpreted depends not just on the prescriptions or commandments of a particular religious scripture but, equally crucially, on the interpreter himself or herself, on his or her own particular ideological position and social location. Any religion can, therefore, be interpreted for ill or for good, for a progressive or for a reactionary political purpose. The temptation to see religion in monolithic terms, generally following a textual or scripturalist approach, must, therefore, be firmly resisted.

The recognition of the diversity of ways of understanding and interpreting each religion opens up the possibility of highlighting and working with alternate interpretations in order to promote a more progressive politics. This is precisely what this modest survey tries to do in the context of contemporary Jammu and Kashmir. It begins with the recognition of the salience of particular ways of understanding and expressing religion and religious identities that tend to promote conflict between different communities in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It then seeks to explore the alternate, more inclusive understandings of the major religions practised in the state, viz. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Dalit-related traditions. It focuses in particular on the ways in which these religions can be interpreted in

order to promote better relations between people of different communities, which, in turn, are indispensable for a lasting peace in the region. Recognising the fact that these alternate understandings are deeply rooted in the lives of many 'ordinary' people, but are often not reflected in 'orthodox' versions of religion, this survey documents the voices of 'ordinary' Muslims, Hindus, Dalits, Buddhists and Christians to present different ways in which religions can be imagined and practised in order to promote communal harmony and counter religious radicalism.

This report is divided into three chapters, focussing on Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh respectively. Owing to paucity of time, the report is necessarily far from exhaustive. Given the nature of the study, the selection of my respondents was random. The voices that they articulate, therefore, are not representative but are certainly illustrative.

Fieldwork for this report was conducted between August 2004 and June 2005. Of the numerous people I need to thank the following deserve special mention: Sumona DasGupta, Ashima Kaul, Mast Farid, Nirmal Kotwal, Arif Irfan and Tenzing Lama. Special thanks to WISCOMP for granting me a fellowship to conduct this study.

**Yoginder Sikand**



# Kashmir

The Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley is the centre of the ongoing conflict over the state of Jammu and Kashmir. While most people in the Hindu/Dalit-dominated Jammu province, and the Shi'a-Buddhist-majority Ladakh region support the state's accession to India, the Muslims of the Kashmir Valley are divided on their political loyalties. While some Kashmiri Muslims support merger with Pakistan, many others aspire to an independent Jammu and Kashmir. The remainder, probably a minority, favour the status quo. The widespread violence, destruction, loss of life and suffering that the Kashmiris have undergone in the past two decades, at the hands of both the militants as well as the Indian armed forces, has led to a sharp escalation of anti-Indian as well as, increasingly, anti-Pakistan sentiments. Today, however, there is also a growing realisation among some Kashmiri Muslims that perhaps living with India is a more realistic option, provided the atrocities committed by the Indian army come to an end and provided the growing anti-Muslim Hindutva forces in India are effectively marginalised.

Possible solutions to the Kashmir conflict that have been put forward in the past by policy makers have generally ignored the central role that religious leaders can play in promoting dialogue and a peaceful settlement of the issue. This oversight owes, in part, to the fact that religion as a social force that shapes politics is generally ignored in conventional policy making that tends to focus mainly on economic and political factors. In the Kashmir case this oversight is particularly unfortunate, given that religion and religion-based identities are at the root of the conflict. It is, therefore, urgent that alternate and more inclusive understandings of religion and community identity be allowed to express themselves in order to challenge the politics of hatred and violence based on exclusivist understandings of religion articulated by key actors in the on-going conflict in the region. Although this should not be taken as suggesting that the Kashmir dispute is essentially religious, rather than political, or that a solution to the conflict lies simply in a liberal or progressive understanding of religion, interpretations of religion, particularly of Hinduism and Islam, that are more accepting and tolerant of other faiths can play a vital role in bringing about a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Kashmir.

## *Islam, Hinduism and the Kashmir Conflict*

The ongoing conflict in Kashmir is often described in the Indian media as an ‘externally sponsored’ ‘Islamic fundamentalist’ uprising. This approach to understanding the conflict is, however, deeply flawed. It ignores the fact that till the early 1990s, Kashmiri nationalism, and not Islam as such, was the moving ideological drive behind the Kashmiri movement for self-determination. It also conveniently overlooks a host of internal factors that led to the mass alienation of the Kashmiri Muslims much before the appearance of Islamist groups as a major force in Kashmir. By deliberately portraying the movement as an ‘Islamic terrorist’ uprising this view of the conflict seeks to rob the demands of the Kashmiris of any legitimacy. Yet, this is not to deny the salience of religion in the ongoing conflict. After all, it is obvious that the Kashmir conflict is intimately related to the communal controversies that led to the Partition of India in 1947. It is likely that if the majority of Kashmiris were Hindus they would not have questioned the accession of their state with India. Difference of religion between the majority of the Kashmiris and the majority of the people of India is thus of central importance in explaining the longstanding demand on the part of many Kashmiri Muslims for political self-determination.

The role of religion in the Kashmiri conflict today can be better understood in the context of the role of Islam in Kashmiri history. Till the fourteenth century, Kashmir was ruled by various Hindu dynasties, and, as elsewhere in South Asia, they sought legitimacy through religion. Brahminical Hinduism was also used as a means for justifying the subordination and oppression of the ‘low’ caste majority, Hindus as well as Buddhists. Consequently, when, from the early fourteenth century onwards, Sufi missionaries began entering Kashmir, many Kashmiris, particularly from ‘low’ caste and tribal communities, converted to Islam in search of equality and liberation from the caste system, impressed by the simple ethical monotheism preached by the Sufis. Over the centuries the vast majority of the Kashmiris turned Muslim, barring some Brahmins who retained their own religion. However, it is interesting to note that a number of Brahmins also converted to Islam. The Muslim population in Kashmir was further supplemented by the influx of migrants from Iran and Central Asia following the establishment of the Shah Miri Sultanate in Kashmir in the fourteenth century.

The spread of Islam in Kashmir was essentially a peaceful process, barring a few aberrations, and occurred as a gradual process of cultural and religious change. Because of this, many converts retained several of the pre-Islamic beliefs and customs, which are today sternly condemned by Islamic scripturalist reformists as ‘un-Islamic’. This gradual process of Islamisation was promoted by the Sufis, particularly by Kashmir’s major indigenous Sufi order, the Muslim Rishis. Under the fourteenth century Nund Rishi, or Nuruddin Nurani, this order became the principal vehicle for the spread of Islam in Kashmir. The Rishis drew upon pre-Islamic practices, such as vegetarianism and asceticism, using them to propagate a form of Islamic Sufism that was genuinely ecumenical in its scope. The Rishis were widely revered by both Hindus and Muslims, and this remains the case even today. They preached devotion to the one God and love and harmony between His creatures, irrespective of caste and religion. They also bitterly critiqued the empty and soulless ritualism of the Brahmins and the Muslim ‘*ulama*’ associated with the royal court. Several of them also castigated rulers for their oppressive practices.<sup>1</sup>

In the mid-sixteenth century Kashmir lost its independence following its conquest by the Mughal Emperor Akbar. In the eighteenth century it came under Afghan domination, and, following that, was incorporated into the Sikh Kingdom under Ranjit Singh. Under the Sikhs and from the mid-nineteenth century, under the Hindu Dogras of Jammu, the Kashmiri Muslims were subjected to cruel oppression, which has been amply documented and does not need repetition here. Most of them worked as peasants, petty artisans and landless labourers. The Dogra state identified itself as defender of Brahminical Hinduism, and in Kashmir it ruled through an intermediary class composed mainly of ‘high’ caste Dogras, Hindu Punjabis and Kashmiri Pundits. It was thus hardly surprising that, from the early twentieth century onwards, struggles launched by a gradually emerging Kashmiri Muslim middle class used Islamic appeals to mobilise popular support. Excluded from the state apparatus and marginalised principally on account of their religion, their struggles for emancipation necessarily took on a religious colouring. This must be seen in the context of the increasing

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<sup>1</sup> For details, see M. Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1997. Also, Yoginder Sikand, *The Role of Kashmiri Sufis in the Promotion of Social Reform and Communal Harmony (14th-16th Century)*, Mumbai: Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, n.d.

identification of the Dogra state with ‘orthodox’ Hinduism and the growing influence among the small, yet powerful Kashmiri Pundit elite, of Hindu chauvinist movements such as the Arya Samaj.<sup>2</sup>

The roots of the present conflict go back to 1947 when India was partitioned. As a Muslim-majority state ruled by a Hindu king, both India and Pakistan staked their claims to the territory. Although the bulk of the territory and population of the state came under Indian control, the political status of Kashmir continued to be disputed even as India took the issue to the United Nations. As many Kashmiri Muslims see it, they have been denied the right to self-determination that they had been promised by the leaders of India’s independence movement and which has also been recognised by the United Nations.<sup>3</sup> They point out what they see as a glaring contradiction in India’s stance on = Kashmir, which they see as evidence of Indian ‘duplicity’. They argue that while India refused to acknowledge the declaration of the Muslim rulers of Hyderabad and Junagadh of acceding to Pakistan because these states had a Hindu majority, it readily accepted the decision of the Hindu ruler of Muslim-majority Kashmir state to join India without seeking a plebiscite. For many Kashmiris, then, the struggle for self-determination is not primarily a religious one as such. Instead, it is defined by a certain notion of Kashmiri Muslim community identity. It is, in this sense, a communal or national question, rather than a religious or Islamic one *per se*. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that from 1947 till the early 1990s the struggle for Kashmiri Muslim self-determination was spearheaded essentially by Kashmiri nationalist organisations, as opposed to Islamist ones, that spoke in terms of a Kashmiri, rather than Islamic, identity.<sup>4</sup> Even today, despite the entry of a number of radical Islamist groups, mainly sponsored by Pakistan, the majority of the Kashmiri Muslims would appear to support the former and their enthusiasm for the Islamist agenda is clearly limited.

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<sup>2</sup> An excellent treatment of the process of communal mobilization among both Muslims and Hindus in this period is Chitralkha Zutshi’s *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and the Making of Kashmir*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> For texts of various UN Security Council resolutions on Kashmir, see *The Kashmir Resistance Movement: United Nations Resolutions and India’s Commitments on Kashmir*, London: World Kashmir Freedom Movement, n.d..

<sup>4</sup> Ramesh Khazanchi, ‘Kashmir: Soft Sufi to Radical Islam’, *Times of India*, 19 December, 1998.

## *Kashmiri 'Ulama Responses to Violence and Peace*

As far as Kashmiri religious leaders are concerned, many 'ulama or Muslim clerics in Kashmir probably support the ongoing militant movement, but others are opposed to it. There is no clear unanimity on the issue even among the 'ulama of each particular Muslim sect. Many of the 'ulama I met felt that the root of the conflict in Kashmir was political, rather than religious. However, some of them did seem to agree with the radical Islamists' claim that the turmoil in Kashmir was a war between Islam and 'infidelity' that would carry on till the latter had been uprooted. Thus, a Deobandi<sup>5</sup> scholar I met in Srinagar appeared to sympathise with a militant Pakistan-based Deobandi group, while two other Deobandi 'ulama I spoke to were surprisingly pro-India, claiming that several of the elders of the Deoband *madrassa* had consistently opposed the creation of Pakistan and had firmly supported the demand for a united India. Several 'ulama, both Bareilvis and Deobandis, insisted on the need for harmonious relations between the different communities, and bitterly critiqued the violation of human rights in India, including Kashmir, by Muslim and Hindu militants as well as the Indian armed forces. They unanimously insisted that the killing of innocent people, irrespective of religion, was a grave sin in Islam, and argued for the need for a peaceful resolution to the Kashmir issue. The killing of a single innocent person, irrespective of his or her religion, they pointed out, is condemned in the Qur'an as tantamount to the slaughter of all humankind. Hence, they stressed, those who loot, rape and kill innocent people cannot be said to be *mujahids* engaged in a legitimate *jihad*. Some of them claimed that numerous militants (in addition to the Indian armed forces) were engaged in such activities, although some others made a distinction between 'freedom fighters' and 'terrorists'. Rather than being Islamically legitimate, violent actions against innocent people were *fitna* – strife, chaos or illegitimate rebellion – the very opposite of true *jihad*. A declaration of *jihad* can, they pointed out, be made only if Muslims are denied the freedom to practice their faith. Since there is no restriction on the practice of Islam in the state, some of them said, the conflict cannot be said to be a *jihad*, though several others disagreed, arguing that fighting for independence was also a form of *jihad*. One of them claimed that it

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<sup>5</sup> For the history of the Deobandis, see Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.

could be considered a *jihad* for those militants whose families had been forced to flee Jammu for Pakistan in the Partition violence. To seek to regain lost Muslim land through force, he argued, might also be recognised as a legitimate *jihad*.

Some *'ulama* pointed out that a declaration of *jihad* cannot be made by just about any Muslim. Rather, a *fatwa* or legal opinion to this effect must be declared by the accepted *imam* or leader of the entire community. They argued that since the different militant groups have shown no effort at building unity among themselves they do not have a single *imam*, who alone could, in theory, might be qualified to issue such a *fatwa*. Even if they agreed on a single *imam*, his *fatwa* would not be binding on other Muslims who did not accept him as their *imam*.

Some *'ulama* I met opposed Kashmir's merger with Pakistan, while several others supported it. Some of them thought that the only realistic solution was an independent Kashmir. Among these, one from a Gujjar family from Jammu, expressed the fear that an independent Jammu and Kashmir might result in the imposition of Kashmiri hegemony on the rest of the people of the state. Some *'ulama* also opined that, given the fact that radical Islamist groups (whose claims of representing 'true' Islam they fiercely opposed) wield the power of the gun, in an independent Jammu and Kashmir bloody civil war might break out between different groups of Muslims, each claiming to represent normative Islam. A few *'ulama*, belonging to the Barelvi tradition, insisted that since Muslims enjoyed religious freedom in India, and since Pakistan had allegedly been turned into what they called a 'Wahhabi' bastion, it was best for the Kashmiris to remain with India rather than join Pakistan or be independent. At the same time, they admitted that they could not say this in public, for fear of being targeted or even physically eliminated by the militants. Yet, they added that by their appeals for peace, tolerance and love, they were, in their own way, seeking to counter the appeal of the militant groups. While bitterly critical of the militants in Kashmir, they were equally adamant that for peace in Kashmir it was imperative that Hindu fascist groups in India also be countered, arguing that the oppression of Muslims in India by Hindu terror groups provided a powerful propaganda tool to Islamist groups in Kashmir, with both feeding on each other.

Numerous Barelvi *'ulama* I met in both Kashmir and in Jammu vehemently disagreed with the political agenda of radical Islamist groups like the Jama'at-i Islami<sup>6</sup> and the Ahl-i Hadith-inspired Lashkar-i Tayyeba<sup>7</sup> that insist on the centrality of an Islamic state. Although, in theory, the Barelvis and many custodians of Sufi shrines do not deny the normative value of a state ruled in accordance with the *shari'ah* or Islamic law, their focus is particularly on individual moral reform, arguing that it is only when Muslims become 'true' Muslims in their own daily lives that an Islamic state could become a reality. That, however, is postponed into the indefinite future, since Muslims, like others, are seen as constantly faced with the temptations of the snares of the world. This explains the overwhelming concern on the part of the shrine custodians and Barelvi scholars with the 'cleansing of the self', through ritual observance, to the almost complete neglect of political affairs. As many of them see it, political power, in order to establish an Islamic state, is not to be actively sought. Rather, it is a gift that God gives to whomsoever He wills. In the absence of an Islamic state, Muslims are believed to be capable of leading fully Islamic lives in India, conducting their own personal and social affairs in accordance with Islamic injunctions. This is, of course, in marked contrast to the position of groups like the Jama'at-i Islami and the Lashkar-i Tayyeba.

The opposition of numerous custodians of Sufi shrines and Barelvi *'ulama* to the 'Islamic state' agenda of groups like the Jama'at-i Islami and the Lashkar-i Tayyeba is also inextricably related to their bitter critique of what they describe as 'Wahhabism'. The term derives from the movement launched by the eighteenth century Arab puritan, Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, who bitterly critiqued what he saw as

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<sup>6</sup> For details, see Afroz Ahmad Bisati, *Religio-Political Role of the Jama'at-i-Islami in Jammu and Kashmir*, M.Phil. Thesis, Shah-i-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies, Kashmir University, Srinagar, 1997, p.16. Also, For a history of the Jama'at-i Islami in Kashmir see Yoginder Sikand, 'The Emergence and development of the Jama'at-i Islami of Jammu and Kashmir (1940s-1990)', *Modern Asian Studies*, 36, 3, 2002, pp. 705-751. The aims and objectives of the Jama'at in Kashmir are briefly described in *The Constitution of the Jama'at-i-Islami Jammu and Kashmir*, Department of Publications and Publicity, Jama'at-i-Islami Jammu and Kashmir, Srinagar, n.d. See also Ashiq Kashmiri, *Tarikh-i-Tahrik-i-Islami Jammu Aur Kashmir: Aghaz-i-Islam Se 1947 Tak*, Department of Publications and Publicity, Jama'at-i-Islami Jammu and Kashmir, Srinagar, n.d.

<sup>7</sup> A general survey of the Ahl-i Hadith in Kashmir is provided in Bashir Ahmad Khan, 'The Ahl-i-Hadith: A Socio-Religious Reform Movement in Kashmir', *The Muslim World*, vol.90, nos. 1 & 2, Spring 2000

the ‘corrupt’ and ‘un-Islamic’ practices and beliefs characteristic of much of popular Islam in his own times. He denied the need to strictly follow one of the four established schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. He denounced Sufism and popular Sufi practices as ‘un-Islamic’. He also opposed the popular Sufi notion of Muhammad being almost superhuman. Muhammad, he insisted, was a mere mortal, although he was a prophet of God. In contrast to the Sufis, he believed that the Prophet was no longer alive, and that his body had turned to dust in his grave. Likewise, he was vehemently opposed to the notion that the Sufis were alive in their graves and that they could intercede with God to have people’s requests met. He castigated such beliefs as akin to *shirk*, or associating partners with God, a heinous, unforgivable crime in Islam. He suggested that Muslims who held such beliefs were no different from ‘polytheists’ (*mushrikun*), and, hence, were actually not Muslim at all. Because of this, the ‘Wahhabis’ are routinely condemned by the Sufis and their followers, including the Barelvis as well as Shi‘as, as ‘traducers of the Prophet’ (*gustakh-i rasul*) and ‘enemies of Islam’ (*dushmanan-i din*).

The Jama‘at-i Islami, the Ahl-i Hadith, with which the Lashkar-i Tayyeba is associated, and the Deobandis, are, typically, seen in Barelvi discourse as different fronts of the ‘Wahhabis’, who are described as ‘anti-Islamic’ and as alleged creations of a range of ‘anti-Islamic’ enemies to destroy Islam from within. Commonly, the ‘Wahhabis’ are described as ‘American’ or ‘Zionist’ agents. It is thus hardly surprising that numerous Barelvi scholars and shrine custodians I met in both Kashmir and in Jammu were bitterly critical of the militant groups associated with one of the above-mentioned Islamic organisations or movements. While they did not directly deny the importance of an Islamic state, they appeared unanimous that, given what they described as the ‘anti-Islamic’ ideology of the different ‘Wahhabi’ groups in Pakistan and Kashmir, the sort of ‘Islamic state’ that the militant groups were seeking to establish would result in bloodshed on a hitherto unprecedented scale, and would hardly deserve to be called ‘Islamic’ at all. Some of them expressed the fear that if Kashmir joined Pakistan or became independent, civil war might break out between the different Muslim sectarian groups, given the ‘Wahhabi’ opposition to the deeply rooted Sufi tradition in Kashmir. Hence, some of them argued, for the Kashmiri Muslims it was better to remain in India, under a secular and democratic state, than to live under a ‘Wahhabi’ state, even if in an independent Kashmir or as part of Pakistan. They claimed that if Hindu



right-wing forces were effectively countered in India and if the oppression of Muslims in India were to cease, Kashmiri Muslims might themselves prefer to live in India. When asked why the Islamist militants continued to enjoy considerable support from local Kashmiris, even from those who did not identify themselves with one or the other of what they called 'Wahhabi' groups, they replied that this was because the 'Wahhabis' had deliberately kept their true beliefs concealed behind the rhetoric of *jihad*. If at all they came to power, they said, they would 'reveal their true colours', and begin to attack the Sufis and their adherents. Hence, they suggested, it was imperative that before this could happen ordinary Kashmiris should be made aware of the actual beliefs of the 'Wahhabis'.

Linked to these complex political arguments is a bitter critique of the actual practice of Islamist groups articulated by several shrine custodians and Barelvi scholars whom I met who insisted that since, by definition, the 'Wahhabis' are 'anti-Islamic', the so-called *jihad* that they had launched showed clear signs of being 'anti-Islamic' as well. They recounted numerous incidents of militants raping, looting and killing innocent people, and of militant leaders making a lucrative livelihood from donations from abroad in the name of *jihad*. They also cited instances of militants violently opposing popular Sufi-related practices and even killing moderate leaders, some of them known for their Sufi piety. All this suggested, as one Barelvi scholar told me, that 'The Islam that they follow is a fake one'. Because of this, he claimed, many Kashmiri Muslims were now increasingly tired of the ongoing violence and were disillusioned with the *jihadist* organisations. 'They yearn for peace and normalcy', he said, 'but they cannot speak out against the oppression of both the armed forces and the militants for fear of being killed'.



Author of several booklets on Kashmiri Sufism, G is a practising Sufi himself. His house in Srinagar serves as a *khanqah* or Sufi lodge, where, everyday, several young men and women gather to listen to him speak and to ask him questions. Interestingly, he counts among his disciples several labourers from Bihar and Jharkhand, non-Muslim Adivasis and Dalits, who have come to Kashmir to work on the treacherous highways.

G tells me that, like most Kashmiris, Hindus and Muslims, he considers Nuruddin Nurani, founder of the Kashmiri Rishi order, as the patron saint of Kashmir, and refers to his example on the issue of inter-community relations. A striking feature of Kashmiri Rishism, G says, is its openness to other religious traditions while at the same time being distinctively Islamic. This, he argues, is in line with a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that exhorts Muslims to accept every word of wisdom, no matter where it is found. He contrasts this with the position of radical Islamists who, he says, believe that Islam is a complete, self-contained and self-sufficient system and that, hence, Muslims need not learn from others.

The Muslim Rishis, G says, willingly adopted many practices and beliefs associated with pre-Islamic Kashmiri Hindu and Buddhist Rishis. Like their Hindu and Buddhist predecessors the Muslim Rishis upheld the belief that ‘knowledge of God’ could be had through true ‘knowledge of the self’. Like the pre-Islamic Rishis, Muslim Rishis, too, adopted stern austerities, and most of them remained unmarried. Although the Prophet Muhammad had himself taken several wives, the Muslim Rishis justified their remaining celibate on the grounds that Jesus, also a prophet for the Muslims, was single, as well as such great Sufis as ‘Uwais Qarni and the female mystic Rabia of Basra. The Muslim Rishis, like their pre-Islamic predecessors, refrained from eating flesh. So strict were they in their refusal to take the life of any sentient being that they survived simply on dry wild vegetables and grasses. While some ‘*ulama* criticised the Muslim Rishis for abstaining from marital relations and for their strict vegetarianism, seeing this as a deviation from the path of the Prophet Muhammad, the Rishis defended themselves, arguing that while they did not consider these as forbidden, they were meant for ordinary people. The Prophet, they argued, had adopted these practices simply to show ordinary human beings how they should live and enjoy the world within limits, but for the ‘spiritually elect’ these were ‘a barrier in the path of following God and His Prophet’.

G takes down a book from a shelf and reads out for my benefit:

Baba Daud Khaki writes in his *Rishi Namah* that the Rishis remain forever engrossed in remembrance of God, constantly in the presence of the Truth. They have, he says, drowned in the ocean of Unity, their light having immersed itself into the light

of God, just as the light of the stars flows into that of the sun. The Mughal Emperor Jahangir in his personal memoirs, the *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri*, writes that ‘Though the Rishis have no religious knowledge or learning of any sort, yet they possess simplicity and are without pretence. They abuse no one. They restrain the tongue of desire and the foot of seeking. They eat no flesh, they have no wives, and always plant fruit-bearing trees in the fields so that men may benefit by them, themselves desiring no advantage’. Baba Daud Mishkati writes in his *Asrar ul-Abrar* that the Rishis led pure and simple lives, surviving on just water and dry wild grasses and vegetables, and did not keep anything for themselves for the next day, giving whatever they had to the poor. They fed travelers and the indigent, earning their livelihood through their own labour. ‘From their hands’, he writes, ‘even birds and insects are safe’.

‘If religion is understood in this way’, G looks up from the book and says, ‘Muslims and Hindus can easily learn to live in harmony and resolve their disputes through peaceful dialogue while at the same time being willing to learn from each other and to recognize their common humanity’.

Religion, G tells me, is a double-edged sword. ‘It can be used as a means to approach God and promote love, justice and harmony, but it can also be misused to promote hatred and conflict and, thereby, serve the cause of Satan’, he says gravely. As examples of the latter he refers to fiercely anti-Hindu Islamists as well as fanatically anti-Muslim Hindutva chauvinists. ‘They both claim to speak for God, while actually doing the work of Satan’, he says. True religion requires that all forms of injustice, including those committed in the name of religion, be critiqued and opposed. He refers in this regard to Nuruddin Nurani’s championing of the cause of the poor and his bitter denunciation of the ‘worldly’ and ‘corrupt’ Muslim *‘ulama*, Hindu priests and the political elites, for which he earned their fierce opposition.. He tells me of how an envious group of priests, described in various accounts as Hindu pundits or Muslim mullahs, conspired to defame Nuruddin Nurani by sending a beautiful female dancer, Yavan Matcchi, to tempt him. Their plans, however, failed, when she repented of her ways and became his disciple. Nuruddin Nurani, G says, was sent to jail under the orders of Sultan Sikander for having protested against the Sultan’s policy of attempting to spread Islam by force. G refers to Pundit Jonaraj,

a contemporary of Nuruddin Nurani, and the court historian of Sultan Zain-ul 'Abidin, as having written in his *Zenataringini*, that Nuruddin Nurani was 'the most accomplished Sufi of the Muslims', because of whose popularity, Suha Bhat, the Brahmin convert Prime Minister of Sultan Sikander, had him imprisoned because 'he was scared that he might cause a revolt'.

G believes that the message of Kashmir's Rishis can play an important role in promoting harmonious relations between Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims, since both the communities still deeply revere them. Their message of ethical monotheism and universal love transcends narrowly inscribed religious boundaries, he stresses. 'God is one, but has a hundred thousand names', he quotes Nuruddin Nurani as having declared.

As I get up to leave G hands me a leaflet containing a collection of some of the sayings of Nuruddin Nurani. 'Read these to appreciate the Rishi path to conflict resolution', he says with a smile. He insists I should quote some of these sayings in the report that I tell him I am preparing. Thus, Nund Rishi says: :

*Abandoning all else I sought You.  
Searching for You, the day turned to night.  
I searched within and then realised You,  
And from then on, I have understood myself and You.  
He is near me and I am near Him.*



*I found solace in His nearness.  
In vain did I search for Him elsewhere  
Lo! I found the Beloved within my own consciousness.*



*The universe is the objective manifestation of the essence of Shiva.  
If you realise this by annihilating your self, you will be merged  
into Him.  
What will you do after death if you do not realise Him in this world?  
Search for Him in your self and pay heed to what I say.  
If you realise what God's Unity is, Your self shall evaporate.  
The light of Unity shines everywhere,  
But the intellect cannot grasp it.  
Who is he who can drink up this ocean?*



*A dog gets comfort sitting on warm ashes.  
A cat snuggles up near a stove.  
A Rishi roams from place to place,  
In forests does he find his rest.  
Where love drags him he goes,  
No matter how painful this may seem.  
For the lover this is not pain but joy.*



*One who does not lift a shield to stave off His arrows,  
And hesitates not to face His sword's thrust,  
Who treats as sweet all the torments that come from Him,  
He alone shall attain success in both the worlds.*



*Among those who claim to be faqirs,  
Are many modern-day Pharaohs, wallowing in luxury.  
But those who abandon everything and die in the path of Allah,  
Enter the fire and, roasted, emerge like shining gold.*



*Die before you die,  
That is the true path to knowledge.*



*O Pundit! How can you hope to escape from the fire  
without good deeds?  
The ego has rendered all your knowledge useless,  
Making you forget that tomorrow you must return to the mud,  
And that all your wealth and pomp shall vanish.*



*Poring over books, they have become strangers to their own selves.  
Verily, like donkeys whose backs are laden with a pile of books.  
Remember God constantly,  
And thereby come close to Him.  
Act in accordance with your knowledge.  
Control the self.  
String together the pearls and make a necklace.*



*Meditate on Him,  
And a fountain of wisdom shall spring up inside you.  
Then you shall see Allah everywhere.  
He is your Lord and you are His slave.  
Engage in constant remembrance of Him,  
And the sound of His Beautiful Names will begin to emanate  
from inside you.*



*Ice, frozen water and snow, all these have been created by God.  
They all appear different, but are of the same essence.  
When the rays of the sun fall upon them,  
They all turn into water.*



*The grass of a lower stock,  
Ignored even by animals.  
See, it reaches the crown of the king!  
How can animals recognise its actual worth?  
On the 'Worldly' 'Ulama and Fake Rishis and Pundits  
The Mullah in the mosque,  
And the Brahmin before the idol of stone,  
Perhaps only one out of a thousand of them will be redeemed.  
Otherwise, Satan shall grab them all.*



*O brother Pundit!  
Till when will you remain wedded to worshipping stones and springs?  
Your thoughtless search bears no fruit.  
Submit yourself to thy Lord and His Messenger,  
Do you not care for success in this world and the next?  
The fake dervish counts his beads,  
And derives joy from hearing their sound,  
But closes the door of the mosque and does not say his prayers.  
Remember, O cheat! You are not God's friend but his foe.*



*The fake mullah is like a fat turnip,  
The fatter it gets, the more it loses its taste.  
The true 'alim, although bestowed with wisdom and learning,  
Considers himself low, as just a slave of God.  
He is indeed fortunate, bearer of a high station.*

*By simply bowing down, you cannot become a Rishi.  
By retiring to a cave, you cannot find God,  
For the mongoose and the rat seldom come out of their holes.  
By bathing, the mind cannot be cleansed,  
For the fish and the otter never climb up to the bank.*



*The fake Rishi is always worried about his stomach.  
Eating delicious food, he has forgotten God.  
Donning the dress of a Rishi, he misleads others.  
If he is a Rishi then who is a thief?*



*O slave of God!  
You have a rosary in your hand,  
But it is actually a knife.  
You've opened a shop in the market-place of this ephemeral world to  
rob others.  
Pay heed lest you shall be used as fuel in the fire.  
Oh! What a pity! You have cut off your own feet with your axe.*



*The Mullah is happy with gifts and feasts.  
The Shaikh is driven by greed and lust.  
The Sufi stops not from cheating others.  
Eating three seers of mutton and a maund of rice,  
The old, infirm Pundit searches for a young virgin wife.  
Near to his funeral pyre, he refuses for a wife a widow.*



*The true lover is he who burns in the fire of love and emerges like a  
piece of gold.  
He alone can travel in the Infinite who is afflicted by the pain of love.*



*Pangs of separation have melted me like the snow of the high peaks,  
The thug has robbed me of all my possessions.*



*The lover sacrifices his all for the sake of his Beloved.  
The two are inseparable like petals and their fragrance.  
Oh Nasruddin! He shall win the world who serves others,  
Whose beard grows white in the quest for wisdom,  
And who eats only after others have eaten.*



*He shall be among the people of paradise,  
Who shares his meal with the hungry,  
Who is driven by the urge to remove all hunger,  
Who bows down humbly in prayer in all sincerity,  
Who scorns anger, greed, illusion, arrogance and self-conceit,  
Such a person alone may be called a Muslim.*



*Feed those in need and be happy.  
Remember the day of Reckoning,  
When an account shall be made of each little grain.  
O Hindus and Muslims!  
What reply will you give then,  
When you have not worshipped God even once with true devotion.  
Remember, the Day of Reckoning will be so stern,  
That all your bones will turn into powder.*



*O Hindus and Muslims!  
How will you attain salvation,  
When you shall be taken to the place  
Where neither mother nor father can help you?  
If you don't take good deeds with you,  
Then prepare yourself for the angel who will drag you to hell.  
O Hindus and Muslims! Turn to God and enter His service.*



*Justice is superior to meditation.*



*Children of the same parents,  
When will Hindus and Muslims cut down the tree of dualism?  
When will God be pleased with them and grant them His grace?*



*We all came into this world as brethren.  
One lives in a palace, another in a hut.  
Still, as brothers we came here all,  
But now we are strangers and foes to each other.  
O God! When will this ever cease?*



*We belong to the same parents,  
Then why this difference?  
Let Hindus and Muslims worship God alone.*



*We came into this world like partners.  
We should have shared our joys and sorrows together.*



*Purify your self (nafs) and make it like a mirror,  
And then shall eternal secrets be revealed to you.  
Mere washing your body is of no use,  
But if you die before your final death, that is the real gain.*



*One who gives the least importance to his own self,  
And vies not with others in gaining worldly respect,  
He ferries himself and others across the ocean,  
And he alone may truly be called a Muslim.*



*Alexander conquered the two great continents,  
But when he died, he went empty-handed,  
Taking with him neither his wealth nor his worldly splendour.*



*O! The time is coming soon when each of us shall enter the grave,  
And friends shall be parted from each other.  
Despite knowing this, the worshippers of the world and wealth  
Have turned their hearts to stone, forgetting God.*



*He who came here, finally died.  
This world is but short-lived.  
All shall come to an end,  
But only God shall remain forever.*



*No shield can stave off the arrow of death.  
The parrot shall fly away, leaving the cage empty.  
People shall shed tears,  
And the rose-like body shall shrivel up.  
The poison must be tasted,  
And the river of blood must be crossed.*



R is a disciple of G, the Sufi master mentioned above. He runs a small shop in the town of Anantnag (Islamabad) in south Kashmir and visits Srinagar once a week to meet his spiritual preceptor. He is an avid reader, and possesses a large library, consisting mainly of books on Islam, Sufism and Hinduism. He agrees with G's view that Rishism, if understood properly, can play a major role in challenging the politics of hatred and in helping solve the Kashmir issue through peaceful dialogue. However, he argues, this is easier said than done, because, 'today few people, even if they claim to be religious Hindus or Muslims, are genuinely concerned about religion. All they want is money and power, for which they use religion as a tool'. 'How, then', he asks, 'can they be expected to heed the message of the Rishis?'

This, however, does not mean, he stresses, that people genuinely concerned about 'true religion' should give up their struggle for peace, reconciliation and justice. He admits, however, that many such people are often scared to speak out against the oppression and widespread violation of human rights by the militants and the Indian armed forces for fear of their lives. He cites a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad according to which speaking out against a tyrannical ruler is also a form of spiritual struggle, but says that in Kashmir today 'few dare open their mouths because they know they may be killed the next day'.

Although R does not see violence as a solution to the Kashmir conflict, and although he is bitterly critical of radical Islamists, he is a strong advocate of Kashmiri independence. He sees no contradiction between his belief in the Sufi tradition and his political views. He believes that the Kashmiris, both Hindus and Muslims, are a separate nationality and that, therefore, they have the right to decide their own political future. He tells me that there is no unanimity among the Sufis and the custodians of the Sufi shrines in Kashmir on what they believe Kashmir's political future should be. Some support independence, some support Pakistan while the rest favour India. Many Kashmiri Muslims, R tells me, who describe themselves as followers of the Sufis also support the political aims of militant groups—freedom from India, independence or accession to Pakistan—while not necessarily subscribing to their particular theology or ultimate political agenda. Thus, for instance, he says, some Kashmiri Muslims who deeply revere the Sufi saints might at the same time support attacks against Indian armed personnel by militants associated with the vehemently anti-Sufi

Lashkar-i Tayyeba, which is associated with the Ahl-i Hadith School that regards Sufism as 'anti-Islamic'. At the same time they might be vehemently opposed to the harsh 'Islamist' dispensation that the Lashkar-i Tayyeba aims at establishing in Kashmir.

R believes that although Kashmiri Rishism contains rich theological resources that can be used to develop a progressive theology of justice, liberation and dialogue, the Rishi tradition has been effectively marginalized over time. From centres of spiritual instruction the shrines of the Rishis and other Sufis have now been transformed into centres of mediation, where people come simply in the hope of beseeching the buried saints to mediate with God in the hope of having their needs met. Taking advantage of the credulous, he says, a class of shrine custodians has developed that lives off their donations, and has little or no interest in wider social issues. The declining appeal of popular Sufism owes much to growing awareness and resentment of exploitative practices associated with the custodians of the shrines. Further, the historical memory of the Rishis as crusaders for social justice has been gradually eclipsed by counter-images of them simply as powerful workers of miracles. For the younger generation of Kashmiris in search of a more socially engaged form of religion, the traditions centred on the shrines are increasingly to be seen as 'superstitious', 'backward', 'exploitative', and 'escapist', and as unconcerned with the real-world concerns of people. As a result of the growing influence of scripturalist and literalist interpretations of Islam, as propagated by groups such as the Jama'at-i Islami, the Ahl-i Hadith, the Tablighi Jama'at and the Deobandis, popular Sufism has come to be branded as 'un-Islamic' or even 'anti-Islamic' and 'Hinduistic' because of the numerous local customs and beliefs associated with it that are seen as having no sanction in the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions. At the same time, R says, recognising the strong roots of the Rishi tradition, some Islamists have, 'craftily' sought to refashion popular understandings of the Rishis by present them as pioneers of the 'narrow, intolerant and exclusive' understanding of Islam that they uphold.

Consequently, R laments, reviving the Rishi tradition is no easy task. One way in which this could be attempted, he suggests, is by developing a new genre of writing on Kashmiri Sufism. Much literature exists, in Urdu, Kashmiri, Persian and English, on the life and teachings of the Sufis of Kashmir, but, for the most part, such texts are written in a hagiographic mode and are replete with stories of the alleged miraculous

feats of the saints, making it difficult to separate fact from fiction. For many younger generation Kashmiri Muslims who have had the benefit of modern education such texts appear to exercise little appeal. This explains, in part, the greater popularity among such youth of alternate forms of Islamic literature, such as published by the Jama'at-i Islami, that propagate an understanding of Islam that appears as more 'rational'.

R stresses the need for an alternate literature on Sufism that is attuned to contemporary conditions and ways of thinking. This form of literature would, in addition to theological and spiritual matters, also focus on the social roles and ethical teachings of the Sufi saints, rather than simply on the miracles popularly associated with them. In this regard, R says, particular stress should be given to highlighting the role of certain Kashmiri Sufi saints in promoting inter-communal harmony based on an expansive understanding of Islam. Such new texts on Kashmiri Sufism should take the form of booklets, rather than scholarly tomes, as is the rule,, and should be modestly priced in order to be easily accessible. In addition to new forms of Sufi writing, R suggests, seminars on Sufism and its contemporary relevance could be organized at Kashmir University. Likewise, he says, seminars on Kashmiri Sufism could be organized at Indian universities, where a total ignorance prevails about the rich cultural heritage of the Kashmiri Muslims.

Another way to popularize the Kashmiri Sufi tradition, R says, is by reviving traditional charitable institutions associated with the shrines. One reason for the popularity of Islamist groups like the Jama'at-i Islami, R tells me, is because of their involvement in providing a range of social services to the needy, from free or subsidized education to medical assistance. While traditionally the Sufi shrines also served the poor, they have now, R laments, degenerated, for the most part, into 'money-making rackets'. Traditionally, Sufi lodges were centres of religious instruction, in addition to providing education and free food in community kitchens to the needy. Today, hardly any shrines provide such services despite earning considerable money from donations from the public. 'If the Sufis themselves dedicated their lives to the service of the poor, the custodians of their shrines seem, by and large, concerned more about filling their own purses than anything else', R says in evident disgust. 'If the Vaishno Devi Temple Trust in Jammu can start a university, why can't the Muslim shrines in Kashmir of the Waqf Board that earns massive revenues from the shrines, run even a mere college?', he asks. Engaging in helping to improve people's lives and addressing

their real-world concerns, instead of simply talking about life after death or about the miracles of the saints, R says, is indispensable if adherents of the Sufi path are to convince others of the relevance of their version of Islam and counter versions of Islam that brand Sufism as complete anathema.



A is a research scholar at Srinagar University. She occasionally writes on social issues for newspapers and works as a volunteer in an orphanage. She explains that her mission in life is to help the poor, particularly victims of the ongoing conflict in Kashmir.

A advocates an independent Kashmir, and says this stance has the support of the majority of the Kashmiri Muslims. I ask her why she opposes the idea of Kashmir merging with Pakistan and she replies, 'Pakistani-administered Kashmir is really backward compared to this part of the state. There's been little economic development there and the educational system is pathetic'. If the Kashmiris were made aware of the conditions there, she says, 'no one in their right mind would want to join Pakistan'. She even goes so far as to say that if Kashmir cannot become independent it would be better being with India. 'I'll feel more comfortable with India, because here at least you have the freedom to express yourself, unlike in Pakistan'.

The independent Kashmir that A dreams of would be a secular state, with equal rights for all communities. Ideally, she says, it should be a fully sovereign state, but she thinks joint control by India and Pakistan of Kashmir's foreign affairs and defence is a more realistic option. If the Hindus of Jammu and the Buddhists of Ladakh wish to be with India, she says, they can do so. As for the Kashmiri Pandits, she says 'Kashmir is incomplete without them and they must be brought back to their homes'.

A tells me that she is a devout Muslim, and she tries to offer her prayers five times a day. Yet, she is opposed to the Islamist agenda of forcibly establishing an Islamic state in Kashmir. 'Once religion enters politics, religion inevitably becomes polluted and it impacts negatively on the most marginalised sections, particularly on women and religious minorities', she says. She admits that the Prophet did establish a state of sorts in Medina, and that, therefore, Islam cannot be divorced from politics, but insists that the state that radical Islamists want to build in

Kashmir is ‘not genuinely Islamic’. ‘If they wanted to set up the sort of state that the Prophet established, I would have no problem’, she tells me, but claims that, ‘These people have little knowledge of Islam and want to impose their wrong interpretation of the faith on us’. She vehemently disagrees with what she calls as their ‘political interpretation of Islam’, which, she says, is calculated simply to garner political power in the name of what they call an Islamic *jihad*. She is also bitterly critical of the patriarchal understandings of Islam that most Islamists seek to enforce. ‘They tell women that we must remain shrouded up and docile. They say if a woman talks with confidence she is shameless’. In her understanding of Islam, this sort of repression has no room, and she refers to the Qur’an to argue her claim that God has made men and women as ‘equals’ and as ‘protectors of each other’.

Having studied at a school run by the Indian army, and having travelled widely in India, A has numerous Hindu friends. We talk about how Hindus are routinely described by Islamist militants as the ‘enemies of Islam’, and she tells me how wrong it is for any community to be denounced as a whole. ‘They are like the RSS’, she says, ‘who think all Muslims are terrorists’. She says her way of understanding Islam does not stop her from having Hindu friends and even from appreciating the good things that she sees in their religion. She tells me that the Qur’an lays down that there can be ‘no compulsion in religion’, and says that militants who kill innocent Muslims go against Islam, and will, she has no doubt, ‘suffer in hell for this’.

Volunteering at an orphanage twice a week, A has seen the trauma as well as the futility of the ongoing violence in Kashmir. ‘We need to make non-violence a way of life. That is the only way for us to win independence’, she says. She argues that non-violence is not opposed to her way of understanding Islam, but admits that few religious leaders in Kashmir are willing to openly speak out against militancy for fear of losing their lives. Nor, she admits, do most Kashmiris who advocate independence, including herself, care particularly about what might befall the Indian Muslims if Kashmir separates from India. ‘I guess this would strengthen the Hindutva camp, which would probably result in many more genocidal attacks against Muslims as in Gujarat recently’, she says, and hurriedly adds, ‘although I am sensitive to the problems of the Indian Muslims, I must think first as a Kashmiri’.



In his twenties, T is a college graduate from a lower-middle class family from Srinagar. Like many other Kashmiris from his class, he is unemployed. He tells me how economic grievances fuel militancy, and how peace cannot come about in the absence of radical economic transformation. He describes his own journey, from being an active supporter of a particular militant group to now being an ardent opponent of war. He tells me how, some fifteen years ago, he joined a group of young Kashmiris who were being taken across the border for armed training. Midway, he changed his mind and returned home. Some of the boys in the group are now in Pakistan. Some others were shot dead by the Indian army when trying to re-enter Kashmir.

T represents a generation of Kashmiri Muslims which has grown up with violence as a daily occurrence. 'Each morning I get up I don't know if this would be my last day', he says matter-of-factly. Unable to cope with the trauma of violence, some years ago he became the disciple of a noted Pir or Sufi master. The Pir told him to say his daily prayers, to concentrate on God through *zikr* and recitation of certain Qur'anic verses and to remove all thought of worldly desires from his mind. 'That was how I was able to prevent myself from going mad seeing all the killings around me', he says. But after remaining as a disciple of the Pir for almost a decade T no longer visits him. 'I still respect him', he says, 'but now I feel I could not get from him what I wanted'. He tells me how his friends mock him for having 'failed the test' by abandoning his Pir, but he defends himself by saying that 'all Pirs claim that they are the best in the world, but who knows who is true?'

Sufism, says T, can indeed play a role in promoting inter-communal harmony. His Pir, he informs me, had a number of Kashmiri Pandit and Sikh disciples as well. The Pir treated them in the same way as his Muslim disciples, and never asked them to convert to Islam. Sufism, which T insists is the 'true form' of Islam, is, he says, 'based on love and equality'. It was through the Sufis that Islam spread in Kashmir. T contrasts the Sufis' peaceful methods of propagation with the violence of the radical Islamists such as the Jama'at-i Islami and the Lashkar-i Tayyeba. 'The Islamists claim that Sufism is idolatry and un-Islamic, but they have no idea of what true Islam is', he argues. 'They have not been able to convert a single person to Islam.', he says. At the same time, T tells me, several Kashmiris who still deeply revere the Sufis are also ardent champions of what they describe as the *jihad* in Kashmir for independence. 'It is not necessarily true that all those who claim to

be followers of the Sufis or opponents of the Wahhabis are opposed to the militant struggle', he says.

T's experience of Sufism and the fact that he has a number of Hindu friends have moulded the way in which he now looks at the Kashmir conflict. He does not recognise it as a *jihad* as he once did. 'Suppose for a moment', he tells me, 'that the Hindus were our enemies'. 'Logically, what the militants should have done was to renounce violence, and preach Islam peacefully among the Hindus and then, by their missionary work and the force of their own character, they could have attracted Hindus to Islam. Then, who knows, all of India could have become Muslim and the Kashmir conflict would have automatically been solved'. The fact that the militants have shown no interest in missionary work, he stresses, shows that they are guided essentially by political, and not religious, goals.

This does not mean that T supports the Indian position on Kashmir. He tells me that he dreams of an independent Kashmir, particularly because the brutal killings of Kashmiris by the Indian forces and what he sees as the continued oppression of Muslims in India have convinced him that the interests of his own people can be best protected in a separate state. Had so many people not been martyred, he says, perhaps the Kashmiri Muslims would have reconciled themselves to living with India, but now, he says, 'too much blood has flowed down the Jhelum for us to accept that'. If the Hindus of Jammu and the Buddhists of Ladakh wish to be with India they should be free to do so, he says, although this would mean a division of the state. He is, however, wary that partitioning the state might lead to considerable bloodshed but says that could be obviated if the division and exchange of populations is conducted in an 'organised way'. However, at the same time, he believes that independence can come about, not through the gun, but only through peaceful dialogue. 'We must peacefully seek to convince the people of India that Kashmir should be independent', he says. He tells me that many Hindus, even supporters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), might be willing to consider the proposal for Kashmiri independence if the demand is put forward through dialogue. 'I had a friend in Delhi who was an RSS worker and vehemently anti-Muslim', he relates. 'Over time, as we became close, he lost his anti-Muslim prejudices and I lost my anti-Hindu feelings. Now we are still in touch and consider each other almost as brothers'. 'It is just a matter of chance', he says, 'that he was born in a Hindu



family and I in a Muslim one, so we have learnt to respect each other despite our differences’.

At the same time as he passionately advocates the case for Kashmiri independence, T tells me that the Kashmiris must also speak out against the radical Islamists, who are ‘ruining our culture’. The ‘Wahhabis’, as he refers to them, represent ‘only one per cent’ of Kashmiris, although they might seem invincible because they wield the power of the gun. Many Kashmiris, he assures me, detest them, not least because of their vehement opposition to Sufism, but are, like himself, afraid to openly criticise them for fear of being killed. He cites the instance of some top Kashmiri leaders, themselves advocates of Kashmiri independence, who, he says, were gunned down by Islamist radicals for criticising their methods and for speaking out against Pakistan. He denounces the Lashkar-i Tayyeba and similar radical Islamist groups as ‘agents of the Pakistanis, particularly the ISI’, who, he says, ‘have no real love for the Kashmiri people’. Many Islamist leaders in Kashmir and Pakistan, he says, have made a fortune in the name of  *Jihad* , while they themselves do not lead what he calls ‘proper Islamic lives’. They have a vested interest in perpetuating the Kashmir conflict, he claims, for if the issue were to be solved their own positions of power and authority would be challenged.

I ask T if he sincerely believes an independent Kashmir can be a viable state. ‘I cannot say anything on that because I am not an economist’, he answers in jest. He then tells me, ‘Honestly, sometimes I am confused as to what exactly my political stand is’. When he recalls the many Kashmiris who have lost their lives, or the scores of Muslims killed by Hindu militants in Gujarat or what he calls the ‘narrow communalism’ of many north Indians, he says he thinks Kashmir really ought to be independent or even join Pakistan. However, he says, when he remembers the many Hindus he met in south India, where he has widely travelled, ‘who are very nice people and who are not anti-Muslim at all’, he thinks that Kashmir perhaps should remain with India. This feeling is strengthened sometimes when he recalls some of his own friends who are decidedly pro-Pakistan and who are also, as he describes it, ‘Wahhabi-minded’. ‘They say that Sufism is anti-Islamic and that the shrines are like temples, which should be destroyed or locked up’. ‘When I remember this’, he says, ‘my blood boils and I feel that perhaps staying with India makes more sense. At least many Hindus respect the  *dargahs* , unlike the Wahhabis’.

T disagrees with me when I remark about the absence of efforts to promote inter-faith dialogue in Kashmir. 'People don't change simply because some religious preachers come and lecture about the need for peace', he points out. 'Sufis', he says, 'do not go to meetings and preach dialogue. That is not the way it works'. Sitting in their homes or in Sufi lodges they 'change people's hearts simply with one look'. One cannot be transformed, he tells me, by mere words. Rather, it is by the appeal of their character that Sufis impress people and win their hearts.



S is a scholar and community activist from Srinagar, and is involved in a number of Muslim organisations. He identifies himself as a former sympathiser of the Jama'at-i Islami, and says that today he is 'simply a Muslim, without any qualifying label'. He tells me that he is committed to inter-faith dialogue and communal harmony, and says this commitment flows out of his own understanding of Islam. He hands me a leaflet published by an organisation he is affiliated with, which, while basically concerned with Muslim issues, also refers to the need for improving relations between Muslims and others. I ask him how this organisation has been working for communal harmony. In reply, he tells me how it has intervened in some disputes involving Hindus and Muslims in Jammu and prevented them from turning violent. 'We could do more', he admits, 'but we have no finances'. An independent and united Jammu and Kashmir but jointly controlled by India and Pakistan, S says, is the only viable solution to the Kashmir conflict. He tells me that not all Jama'at sympathisers are pro-Pakistan, and claims that even the hardliner faction led by Sayyed Ali Gilani has now veered round to agreeing to an independent Kashmir if the majority of the Kashmiris so desire, a considerable shift from its earlier dogged refusal to reconsider its demand for merger with Pakistan. Many Kashmiris now realise, he says, that their economic conditions would drastically worsen if they join Pakistan. 'Pakistan does not produce even a needle', he exclaims, obviously exaggeratedly.

S disagrees with Gilani's characterisation of the struggle as a religious war or *jihad*. 'It is a political, not a religious, issue', he argues. However, he notes that the Hindu right-wing, the Indian state as well as Islamist militants have sought to present the ongoing movement as an 'Islamic uprising', which he does not recognise. Yet, in the same breath, he claims that it might be a *jihad* for those numerous militants from

Pakistan whose families originally hailed from the Jammu province but who were forced to flee to Pakistan in 1947. '*Jihad*', he explains, 'can be fought to recover lands that Muslims have been expelled from'. 'Tens of thousands of Muslims were killed in Jammu then, while there was no violence against Hindus in the Kashmir Valley. Thousands of Muslims had to migrate to Pakistan', he tells me. It was not just Hindu militants and the Maharaja's forces that were behind these attacks. He alleges that Shaikh Abdullah conspired to turn Jammu into a Muslim-minority region so that the Muslim Conference, which had a major presence in the area, would not be able to challenge his National Conference, which enjoyed considerable popularity in the Kashmir Valley. It was thus a means to ensure Kashmiri Muslim political supremacy, he contends, and claims that top Indian rulers were also involved in this alleged plot to wipe out Muslims from the Jammu province.

As S continues to extol the virtues of *jihad*, I ask him about his views on the negative portrayal of other communities in *jihadist* propaganda. They are generally painted as 'enemies of God', collectively engaged in an alleged global conspiracy against Islam, I point out. He thinks for a while and then says, 'Yes, I agree, it is totally wrong to brand other communities like this. Not all of them can be said to be anti-Muslim'. Not only is this factually incorrect, he says, it also serves as a major hurdle in *tabligh* or Islamic missionary work, which, he says, is meant to be the 'foremost duty' of believers in Islam. In fact, he stresses, from the Islamic point of view, *tabligh* is more important than capturing political power. Rather than hankering after political power, which is a gift that God gives to whom He wills, S says that Islamic groups in Kashmir should desist from politics and violence and focus their attention on missionary efforts among Hindus. Because of their 'mad thirst for political power', radical Islamist groups in Kashmir have given Islam a 'bad name', making it 'seem synonymous with bloodshed and terror', as a result of which, S contends, the missionary programme has 'suffered beyond repair'.

Islam, S explains, spread in Kashmir primarily through the agency of the Sufis, whose message of love and equality attracted many Kashmiris, particularly from among the labouring castes. S contrasts these Sufis with Lashkar-i Tayyeba and Jama'at-i Islami militants, and says solemnly, 'Peace and the spread of Islam cannot come about through the gun. You have to change people from within. Islam cannot be forced

down their throats'. He critiques the Lashkar as a radical 'Wahhabi' outfit and says that its agenda of imposing 'Wahhabism' in Kashmir and forcibly attacking Sufi or local forms of Islam is bound to be counter-productive. It might even lead to civil war among Muslims, he says, for today in Kashmir there are dozens of armed Islamist groups, each seeking to capture power. Furthermore, he stresses that if groups like the Lashkar and Jama'at were ever to establish the 'Islamic' state of their dreams it would inevitably lead to violent opposition from the Hindus of Jammu and the Buddhists of Ladakh, a sure recipe for perpetual civil war. 'They think that all Hindus are enemies of Islam and believe that the victory of Islam lies in crushing the Hindus', he says. 'This is not how I, for one, understand my religion', he explains. He tells me how preaching Islam to others, the principle duty of a Muslim, is a task that the Lashkar is certainly not cut out for. 'They repel people from Islam, rather than attracting them', he insists. He cites the example of some Lashkar activists who entered a village and forced an old Hindu woman to give them her cow. She pleaded with them to take her goat instead, but they insisted on the cow, simply to terrorise her. They grabbed the cow and slaughtered it in front of her eyes. 'Can these people', he asks in obvious disgust, 'ever bring Hindus closer to Islam at all?'

While S opposes the Islamists' tactics he also argues that many aspects of popular Kashmiri Sufism, which the Islamists denounce, are not really 'Islamic'. 'Many wrong and superstitious beliefs and practices have crept in', he says, 'which the Sufis, had they been alive today, would themselves not have recognised'. For the custodians of many Sufi shrines their work is simply a means of earning a livelihood, he says. He tells me how in his childhood people in his village would reserve a special room for visiting shrine custodians who claimed to be Sufi Pirs. Special food would be cooked for them and they would collect donations from the villagers. Today, he says, people can 'see through this oppression and exploitation', which is one factor for the decline of popular Sufism, particularly among the educated youth. This disenchantment with the Pirs has also translated, he explains, into growing numbers of youth being attracted by more scripturalist-minded groups such as the Jama'at, and, later, the Lashkar. But, S says, many Kashmiris are tired of militancy and long for peace.

Would that suggest the possibility of a revival of Sufism, I ask him. 'A reformed Sufism, perhaps', he answers, but adds, 'Allah knows best'.

# Jammu

The Jammu province accounts for around 45 per cent of the total population of Jammu and Kashmir. The province consists of six districts: Doda, Poonch, Rajouri, Udhampur, Jammu and Kathua. Muslims form the majority of the population in the first three districts, and Hindus in the remaining three districts. Overall, the Hindus form a majority in the province, with Muslims accounting for around a third of the population. Other communities living in the province include Christians and Sikhs. Of the Hindu population around a third are Scheduled Castes, the rest being mainly Rajputs, Brahmins, Punjabis and Banias.

Jammu is popularly known as the ‘City of Temples’, owing to its large number of Hindu shrines. Most of the inhabitants of the town are Hindus, but the town also has a fairly substantial Muslim population. Although there are a few local Dogri-speaking Muslims in the town, most of them are fairly recent settlers, from Poonch, Doda, Rajouri and from the Kashmir Valley. Prior to 1947 Jammu had a substantial presence of Muslims. However, in the 1947 Partition riots, the Jammu province witnessed a large-scale slaughter of Muslims, with thousands killed and many more forced to flee to Pakistan. Consequently, Jammu town was almost completely depleted of its Muslim population. The violence in Jammu was in contrast to the situation in the Kashmir Valley at this time, which remained largely peaceful and did not witness any communal violence directed against its small non-Muslim minority, mainly consisting of Kashmiri Pandits. It was only from the 1950s onwards that small numbers of Muslims began settling in Jammu once again, mainly from other parts of the state.

Despite its recent history of communal antagonism, which is further reinforced by the strong presence of right-wing Hindu organisations in the town, Jammu has not witnessed any large-scale communal riots in recent years. This is remarkable, given the situation in the Kashmir Valley. There have been minor clashes between Hindu and Muslim groups in Jammu town, generally in the wake of massacres of Hindus in Kashmir, but the local administration has been able to prevent these from breaking out into full-fledged communal riots. There appears to be considerable interaction between the Muslims and the local Hindus

and Sikhs in the town at the personal as well as economic and professional levels. Despite this, there are few, if any, organised efforts to promote any sort of inter-religious or inter-community dialogue. Negative communal stereotypes remain deeply-entrenched. Few, if any, of the several NGOs in the town are engaged in actively promoting communal harmony. When asked why this is so, the typical reply is that community, including religious, leaders are simply not interested in such work. This complaint generally goes along with a routine denunciation of religious leaders, who are alleged to use religion simply as a means of self-aggrandizement and are, therefore, not interested in dialogue. They have, so it is often claimed, a vested interest in preserving and promoting communal differences. This fits in with a certain image of many religious leaders of being not 'really religious' at all. Another reason that is often put forward to explain the absence of any organised work to promote inter-community dialogue is that although some religious leaders do feel the need for this, they do not have the contacts and the resources to do such work. Since there is little or no interaction between religious leaders of the different communities it is not surprising that even those who are interested in promoting dialogue are unable to do so.

On the whole, therefore, it would be safe to say that in Jammu, as elsewhere in India, most people have little understanding of the religious beliefs of other communities. The University of Jammu does not have a department of religious studies. Scholars associated with the university have done little research on local religious belief systems and nothing at all on inter-community relations and perceptions in the region. There is no literature available on the subject, and none of the several Hindu and Muslim bookshops in Jammu stocks any such literature. The local press also displays little interest or no in the subject.

### ***Local Religious Mechanisms for Inter-Community Interaction: The Sufi Shrines of Jammu***

Despite the lack of organised efforts to promote inter-faith dialogue in the town, there are local mechanisms that work, in their own limited ways, to promote interaction between the different communities at the religious level. For instance, it is not rare to find shops and buses displaying pictures of images associated with different religious traditions. This might be construed, in some cases, as simply good business sense, but in most cases it does reflect a sincerely held belief

of all religions being valid or as channels of power in their own ways. These multi-religious images have an important symbolic importance, especially if they are displayed, as they often are, in public spaces. It is, however, important not to exaggerate the prevalence of this sort of attitude. It is not very common, and is the exception rather than the rule. Then again, such images and associated beliefs are generally confined to some Hindus, and it is rare for them to be seen in Muslim shops and vehicles.

The single most important and influential local religious institutions for promoting inter-community in Jammu, as almost everywhere else in India, are the town's numerous Sufi shrines or *dargahs*.<sup>8</sup> *Dargahs* are mausoleums that house deceased Sufi saints. The general belief is that the saints are still alive, in a spiritual sense, and, being close to God, can sometimes intercede with Him to have people's requests met. The analogy with a government department is often used to explain this belief. Just as one cannot approach the head of the department without going through a clerk, so, too, it is said, it is generally difficult to approach God directly. One is, so it is believed, more likely to have one's requests met if one approaches God through the mediation of the saint. This is especially the case since one recognises oneself as a sinner, and hence acknowledges that one is unlikely to have one's requests met if one acts on one's own.

This belief in the mediatory powers of the Sufis transcends community boundaries and unites believers in a shared sacred tradition. This is not to say that people from different communities view the Sufis in an identical way. Muslims, typically, see the Sufis as true Muslims, sometimes as missionaries of Islam, and as *awliya-i allah* or 'friends of Allah'. Hindus who flock to Sufi shrines tend to see them as pious beings, in the same rank as genuine *sadhus* and mendicants who have renounced the world, although, strictly speaking, not all or even most of the Sufis were world-renouncers. Some Hindus even think of the Sufis as incarnations of God or as deities (*devtas*). Needless to say, this is a view that Muslims do not agree with.

Jammu town is home to a number of Sufi shrines, many of them being centuriesold. Interestingly, the majority of those who visit the shrines

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<sup>8</sup> For details, see Yoginder Sikand, 'Popular Beliefs and the Dialogue of Everyday Life: Inter-Religious Interaction at the Sufi Shrines of Jammu', *Studies in Inter-Religious Dialogue*, vol.10, No.2, 2000.

are Hindus, from different castes. The shrines provide the only arena in the town where people of different communities participate together in common worship and devotion. As such, then, they are a unique institution for promoting inter-community interaction at the religious level.

Hindus who visit the shrines sometimes prostrate before the graves of the Sufis, a practice not common among Muslim visitors who believe that prostration must be made only to God. Hindu devotees also sometimes touch the feet of the shrine custodians in reverence. They take oil from the clay lamps placed in the shrines, which they believe to be blessed, and apply it on their foreheads or wipe their hair with it. Some of them even press the graves of the Sufis as if massaging the tired bodies of the saints. Muslim visitors generally kneel or stand up before the grave and offer *fatiha*, reciting the opening verse of the Qur'an, asking God to bless the saint. People from different communities offer prayers together at the graves, there being no set format for this. Generally, the visitors pray silently, cupping their hands in front of them or holding them up, in Muslim fashion, in supplication. Sometimes, the custodians of the shrines, almost all of whom are Muslims, recite some verses from the Qur'an and then offer a prayer in Dogri or Urdu for the welfare of all the devotees present. After the prayer is over, people accept little drops of sugar as *prashad* or *tabarruk*, which may be offered by the custodian or by a person he appoints, who may be a Hindu or a Muslim.

Thursday evenings are special occasions for the Sufi shrines, when large numbers of people visit them. Another popular occasion for visiting the shrines is during the '*urs* celebrations of the buried saints. '*Urs*, in Arabic, means 'marriage', and marks the death anniversary of the saint, whose death is commemorated as his symbolic meeting with God. Some people visit the shrines simply out of devotion and reverence. Many, however, come in the hope that they would have their requests met through the mediation of the saint. It is common for Hindus who visit the *dargahs* to also visit Hindu shrines in order to have their prayers granted. In this sense, the *dargahs* are seen as seats of invisible power that one can, through proper devotion, access, and not necessarily as specifically 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' spaces in a narrow sense. The saint is believed to help everybody, irrespective of caste and creed, for, it is argued by many Hindu devotees, true saints are, in a sense, beyond religious and caste boundaries.



The mediation of the saint, some believe, can be more efficacious through the agency of the custodian of the shrine, the *mutawalli* or *sajjada nashin*. Usually, though not always, the custodian is a lineal descendant of the saint. He is often believed to have inherited some of the powers of his saintly ancestor. This explains why, in several *dargahs*, people, Hindus as well as Muslims, wait upon the custodian with their requests. In one *dargah* in Jammu that I visited on numerous occasions, most of these supplicants are Hindu women from middle-class, and presumably 'upper' caste, families. The custodian sits on a raised platform, while the supplicants sit below him. They approach him in turn and relate their problems, and he offers them solace and advice. In the case of some people who are said to be troubled by evil spirits, he runs an iron implement (*chimta*) on their heads and back while uttering a silent prayer. He tells his supplicants that he himself cannot do anything because he is simply a 'slave of God' (*rabb da banda*). They should, instead, pray to God and abstain from sin, and God might then be moved to grant them their requests or solve their problems. In case their requests are met, he says, they should come back to the shrine and offer incense and oil in honour of the saint. He jokes with his supplicants and speaks to them like a father figure, which helps create a certain charisma around him as a true man of God. He does not accept any payment for his services and says that he does this work simply out of devotion and gratitude to God. However, some other custodians are said to accept donations, a practice which has led to the entire class of *sajjada nashins* being viewed by many people as corrupt and as no different, in this regard, from charlatan *babas* and *sadhus*.

The *dargahs* of Jammu all have a distinctly 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' look about them. The graves that they house are all in 'Muslim' style, and are covered with green silk sheets, often with verses from the Qu'ran embossed on them. The structures of the buildings are also 'Islamic', with domes and minarets, and sometimes with a small mosque attached to them as well. Inside, the shrines are also often decorated with pictures of Sufi saints or of the Ka'aba in Mecca and the Prophet's mosque in Medina and posters that bear verses from the Qur'an in Arabic calligraphy. Yet, they are open to people of all communities for worship, this being in contrast to both Hindu temples as well as mosques. The ecumenical appeal of the shrines is enhanced by the fact that many of the daily rituals performed therein are not associated with one particular religion or community, being more in the nature of local traditions that are followed across community boundaries.

The stories that are told about several of the shrines in Jammu town – their ‘foundational myths’, one could call them – reflect a fascinating historical process of negotiation of inter-community relations in a harmonious way. These stories are often invoked to stress the point that people of different religions should live together in peace, that God is one, that all humans, at a certain level, are basically the same, and so on. A few examples may be cited here to illustrate this point:

### ***The Dargah of Pir Raushan ‘Ali Shah***

The first major Sufi to come to the Jammu region is said to have been Pir Raushan ‘Ali Shah, whose *dargah* is located at Gumat, near the famous Raghunath Mandir, in the heart of Jammu town. The Pir is said to have been very tall, which explains why his grave is some 20 feet (or nine *gaz*) long, and hence the shrine’s popular name of Maqbara Naugazan. Some believe the Pir to have been one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, but, clearly, this is fallacious. A more reliable claim is that he arrived in Jammu in the 13th century, before Timur’s invasion of North India. He is said to have performed many miracles, which, it is claimed, so impressed the Hindu Raja of Jammu that he became his devotee and requested him to settle in his city. When the Pir died, the Raja laid him to rest with full honours and had a grave constructed for him.

### ***The Dargah of Pir Lakhdatta***

The name *lakhdatta* literally means ‘the giver of hundreds of thousands’. It could signify belief in this Pir’s status as a giver of Sufi wisdom or as a helper to people in distress and need. The small *dargah* of Pir Lakhdatta is located in a bazaar named after him. The life of the Pir is shrouded in mystery, although he is said to have been a close associate of Guru Nanak, the first guru of the Sikhs. The cult of Pir Lakhdatta is particularly popular among the agriculturist castes of Punjab and Rajasthan, both Hindu as well as Muslim. This tradition is linked with the cult of Guga Pir, said to have been a Rajput chieftain who converted to Islam. In some versions of the account of Guga Pir’s life, he and Pir Lakhdatta are presented as one and the same person. According to local tradition, after his death, half of Guga Pir’s body was taken by his Muslim followers and buried according to Muslim rites, and to them he is known as Zahir Pir. The other half of his body was cremated by his Hindu followers, who revere him as Pir Lakhdatta.

### ***The Dargah of Baba Budhan ‘Ali Shah***

Another noted Sufi whose shrine is located in Jammu and who is associated with Guru Nanak is Baba Budhan ‘Ali Shah. His real name is said to have been Sayyed Shamsuddin, but he is known more popularly as Baba Budhan (‘The Old Baba’) because he was blessed with a very long life. Baba Budhan was born near Lahore in the village of Talwandi, the birthplace of Guru Nanak. Tradition has it that he was a very close friend of Guru Nanak, and the two would often meet to discuss spiritual matters.

### ***The Dargah of Pir Mitha***

Pir Mitha’s *dargah* is located on the banks of the river Tawi, not far from the Jammu palace. According to local tradition, he came to Jammu from Iran in 1462 during the reign of Raja Ajab Dev. It is possible that Pir Mitha was an Isma‘ili Shi‘a, although today there are no Isma‘ilis left in Jammu.

One day, so a version of the local legend has it, the Raja’s wife fell seriously ill. The Pir is said to have cured the queen by performing a miracle, as a result of which the king and many of his subjects became his disciples. In particular, a large section of the Bhishtis or water-carriers, considered to be a ‘low’ Hindu caste, accepted him as their spiritual preceptor. Soon, the Pir’s fame spread far and wide, and many people began converting to Islam at his hands. Because of this, the Pir was faced with stiff opposition from some Hindu priests. His most vehement opponent was Siddh Gharib Nath, a Shaivite Gorakhnathi Yogi. However, as the story goes, the two soon became friends and, consequently, the Pir is said to have ceased his missionary work. The Pir and the Yogi became, it is said, so close that they decided to settle down together in the cave where the Pir lived. This cave is known as Pir Khoh or the ‘Cave of the *Pir*’.

Legend has it that the *yogi* entered the cave and travelled all the way to Matan in Kashmir, never to return again. After he disappeared, his disciples came to Pir Mitha and requested him to accept them as his followers. The Pir declined, and told them that they should be faithful to their own guru. When this failed to satisfy them, the Pir relented somewhat and told them that they could, if they wanted, take his title of *pir*, generally associated with Muslim mystics. That is why the cave is today called as Pir Khoh and the heads of the Nath yogis who reside there are known as *pirs*.

A sizeable number of devotees of Pir Mitha today belong to the Jheer community. The Jheers identify themselves as Hindus, and although they are of 'low' caste background (their ancestral profession consisted of drawing water and cleaning utensils for the 'upper' castes) they now claim to be 'high' caste Rajputs. One branch of the Jheers, who are known as Kashps, revere Pir Mitha as their patron saint. It is customary for many Kashps who live in Jammu to visit the *dargah* every morning after having a bath. All their auspicious ceremonies are conducted only after paying their respects at the shrine. Many Kashps are migrants or descendants of migrants from Sialkot, now in Pakistan, who fled to Jammu in the wake of the Partition riots in 1947. Several Kashps claim that they managed to flee their homes to Jammu unscathed because of the blessings of their *pir*.

### **The *Dargah* of Baba Jiwan Shah**

Baba Jiwan Shah was born in 1852 in the Sialkot district of Punjab in a family known for its piety. At the age of 23, upon the advice of his preceptor, the Chishti Sufi Sain Baqr 'Ali Shah, he left his village, spending 12 years in meditation and austerities at Akhnoor, on the banks of the river Chenab. He then headed for Jammu, where he took up residence in a graveyard, meditating near the grave of the Sufi Sher Shah Wali for 12 years. After this, he spent the rest of his life in the region around Jammu, preaching and making disciples, who included Hindus as well as Muslims. Among these are said to have been Maharaja Pratap Singh, ruler of Jammu and Kashmir (1885-1925) and his brother Amar Singh. The king fixed a regular monthly stipend (*wazifa*) for him and often invited him to the royal palace. Another disciple of the Baba was a certain 'low' caste man from the Chamar caste, who is buried in a small shrine near the Baba's *dargah* in the Mohalla Jeewan Shah in the heart of Jammu town.

### **The *Dargah* of the *Panj Pir***

At Ramnagar, on the outskirts of Jammu town is the shrine of the *panj pirs*, 'the five saints'. The *panj pir* cult is widespread all over northern India and Pakistan. The composition of the *panj pirs* varies from place to place, and in some cases, it includes both Muslim as well as Hindu figures. The origins of the cult have been traced back to the Hindu cult of the five Pandava brothers, heroes of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, as well as to the Shi'a Muslim tradition of revering the five members of the *ahl ul-bayt*, the 'holy family' consisting of the Prophet

Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, her husband 'Ali and their sons Hasan and Husain.

Little is known about the history of the *panj pir* shrine in Jammu. Legend has it that five brothers of a Muslim family spent many years there in meditation and austerities and then they all left to go their own ways. One day the five *pirs* appeared in a dream to the Maharaja and admonished him for sleeping with his feet pointing to their *chillah*, the place where they used to meditate. The next morning, the Maharaja ordered the spot to be excavated, and an umbrella and five kettledrums were found. Believing this to be a holy place, he ordered the construction of a *dargah* there. He then appointed his royal charioteer, Alif Shah, and a Muslim woman, Khurshid Begum, as custodians of the shrine.

The great popularity of the *panj pir* shrine, especially among the local Hindus, is believed to be a largely post-1947 phenomenon. It is said that following the Partition riots some Hindus attempted to take over the shrine, claiming that it was actually a temple of the five Pandavas. They went so far as to forcibly install a Shiva *linga* on top of the grave-like structure inside the *dargah*. However, the story goes that the next morning people discovered that the *linga* had cracked into pieces on its own. The Hindus took this as a sign that the shrine was actually a Muslim *dargah* and so withdrew their claims.

At present, the *dargah* is looked after by a Hindu Rajput, Kuldip Singh Charak. He is the husband of a Muslim woman, Shamim Akhtar, the daughter of Khurshid Begum, the first custodian of the shrine. He took over this responsibility following Khurshid Begum's death in 1986.



The participation of people from different religious and caste communities in the Sufi shrines of the town helps, in its own ways, in breaking down barriers. Sometimes, it provides a means for people to build friendships across community boundaries. In a way it also helps challenge, or at least question, deeply rooted social hierarchies. Thus, while ordinarily many 'high' caste Hindus may not eat food cooked by Muslims, in the shrines they accept the sweets prepared by Muslims or 'low' caste Hindus. It is also not rare for Muslim Sufi shrine custodians who are practising Sufis themselves to accept Hindu disciples, while not asking them to renounce their own religion. In one shrine that I visited, a Punjabi Hindu is a disciple of the Muslim custodian.

He regularly attends the shrine, where he dons a Muslim-style cap and sits in the courtyard to distribute sweets to the visitors as *prashad*. This he does on his own volition and has not been told to do so by his spiritual master. Yet, he still identifies himself as a Hindu and goes to temples as well, and this his Sufi preceptor does not forbid. In this and several other cases, the categories of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', while in a sense still valid, do not denote the radical separation, difference or conflict that they often seem to.

It is important, however, not to exaggerate the ecumenical potential of the Sufi shrines. For many Muslims who attend the shrines, the Sufis are seen, above all, as pious Muslim and often as missionaries of Islam. At the same time, they also taught, so their Muslim devotees would stress, love for all creatures of God irrespective of religion and caste, but their Islamic identity is not in doubt. Another phenomenon that must be taken into account when assessing the possible role of the shrines in promoting interfaith dialogue and interaction is the declining influence of popular Sufism in some sections of the Muslim community. Several 'educated' Muslims in Jammu, as elsewhere, see the cults centred on the shrines as 'un-Islamic'. The opposition to the cults of the shrines is articulated in what are presented as 'Islamic' terms. Thus, it is argued that these cults are a later development, and thus are an 'innovation' (*bid'at*) from the path of the Prophet. A tradition attributed to the Prophet is routinely cited, according to which the Prophet declared that every *bid'at* leads to hell. Hence, several practices associated with the cults of the shrines, such as singing *qawwalis* or faith in the intermediary powers of buried saints or the belief that the saints are still alive and can hear one's requests, are branded as 'un-Islamic' and as leading those who are involved in them to hell. Furthermore, some of these beliefs are said to be *shirk* or akin to polytheism as they allegedly set up helpers in addition to God. Several other practices are also branded as 'Hinduistic' (*hinduana*). In this form of Islamic 'reformist' discourse, criticism of the cults of the shrines is also associated with a critique of the shrine custodians, who are said to have a vested interest in promoting what are branded as 'un-Islamic' beliefs (such as faith in the miraculous powers of the saints) in order to fleece the credulous. In turn, they come to be seen as working to promote Muslim backwardness, including the political marginalisation of the community.

Opposition to the cults of the saints is one of the major focuses of some Islamic groups active in the Jammu region, as elsewhere in India. These include the Hanafi Deobandis, the Islamist Jama‘at-i Islami as well as the vehemently anti-Sufi Ahl-i Hadith, all of whom have established a limited presence in Jammu in recent decades. The Deobandis have a large *madrasa* in Jammu town, and the *imam* of the largest mosque in Jammu is also said to be a Deobandi. Besides, there are several Deobandi mosques and *madrasas* elsewhere in the Jammu province. The Deobandi cause has been further facilitated by the growth of the Tablighi Jama‘at, a Deobandi-inspired movement that seeks to purge Muslim society of what it sees as ‘un-Islamic’ accretions. The movement is said to have started working in the area from the 1970s onwards. As elsewhere, differences between Deobandis and the shrine custodians are intense. Several ‘*ulama* who are attached to the shrines whom I met denounce the Deobandis as hidden fronts of the Saudi ‘Wahhabis’ and as being agents of what they call the ‘enemies of Islam’. They see other Muslim groups, such as the Jama‘at-i Islami and the Ahl-i Hadith, in a similar light. Some of these ‘*ulama* identify themselves with the Bareilvi school of thought, which is associated with the late nineteenth century Imam Ahmad Raza Khan of the town of Bareilly, in present-day Uttar Pradesh, who ardently defended the Sufi tradition from its detractors. Others identify themselves simply as *dargah wale* or ‘people of the Sufi shrines’.

In assessing the ecumenical potential of the Sufi shrines it must also be borne in mind that for many Hindus who attend the shrines the Sufis might be seen as pious men of God, but this does not necessarily or always translate into positive perceptions of or closer interactions with Muslims, although this sometimes does happen. It is possible for a Hindu to hold deeply-rooted negative stereotypical notions of the Muslim as the religious ‘other’ at the same time as he or she regularly visits a Sufi shrine. Often, this is because, for many people, the shrines are visited only in the hope of getting requests met or problems solved, and not necessarily simply out of devotion and faith or a quest for religious truth. In fact, at the shrines there is generally no overt discussion of religious doctrines, these being often limited in their expression only to brief prayers, often silent and undertaken individually. Hence, although there is certainly an encounter and exchange between people of different communities, as such there is very little dialogue at the theological level at the shrines. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the vast majority of the Hindus who visit the

shrines would learn little about Islam or the doctrines of the Sufis since this is hardly discussed, except perhaps in a very general way when the custodian might refer to these when talking about the need for proper ethical behaviour to people who come to him for assistance. It is likely that since Jammu is a ‘communally-sensitive’ town and since Muslims there live as a small and vulnerable minority, the custodians think it pragmatic not to overtly stress the Islamic aspect identity of the shrines for fear of being looked at with suspicion. This is pragmatic, possibly, in another way, for some custodians who accept donations, because an overtly Islamic identity would possibly mean less Hindu visitors and, hence, a decline in their incomes.

Given the fact that people from different communities visit the shrines in sizeable numbers, the *dargahs* of Jammu could, it might be thought, be motivated to play a more interventionist role in promoting greater understanding between the different communities at the religious level. There are several constraints, however, in this regard. To begin with, each shrine is an independent entity. There are few formal links between them, and because they do not operate as a group it is difficult to get them to work together for a common social purpose. Secondly, the shrine custodians might appear not to wish to overtly stress the Islamic identity of the shrines in a more explicit way, for reasons mentioned earlier, which limits their own interest in inter-religious dialogue initiatives. Thirdly, many of the custodians do not have the ‘right’ contacts, funds and cultural capital that might be needed to organise dialogue initiatives with religious leaders of other communities. Fourthly, in some cases there is simply no interest in the issue since for some shrine custodians their primary consideration is earning a livelihood through the shrines rather than social reform or activism. There is also the simple fact of inertia, and the feeling that since Muslims are in a minority in the town they should maintain a low profile. To add to this is the general perception that such efforts would make little or no difference at all in promoting communal harmony in the region in the absence of a political solution to the Kashmir conflict.



T is an Islamic scholar belonging to the Bareilvi school of thought and is the *imam* of a mosque near Jammu. I met him in his simple, sparsely furnished room adjacent to the mosque, where he was surrounded by a



group of young students. 'Killing an innocent Hindu just because he isn't a Muslim is certainly not a *jihad*', he tells me in response to my query about what he feels about the ongoing violence in Kashmir. He explains that in a legitimate Islamic *jihad* non-combatant non-Muslims must not be harmed. Rather, he says, they must be protected. Yet, he laments, many of those who claim to be waging a *jihad* in Kashmir, do not abide by this basic Islamic principle. He recounts the case of a fellow Barelvi *maulana* who made this point at a public meeting and was later threatened with death by activists from the dreaded Lashkar-i Tayyeba.

T is loathe to discuss politics. 'I am a religious man', he says, but he insists that violence is not the way to solve the Kashmir issue. Rather than directly discuss Kashmiri politics, he prefers to dwell on what he believes is the 'correct' Islamic notion of *jihad*. He argues that physical violence for the 'defence' of Islam, when Islam or its adherents are under threat, is legitimate, but war for worldly advancement, for land or for power, is not. He tells me that the conflict in Kashmir is simply over the land – both India and Pakistan want to grab it, and they are not really concerned about the people as such – and hence it is not a 'real' *jihad*. He does not hesitate to condemn the excesses of both the Indian armed forces and certain Pakistan-based militant groups. He recounts cases of killings of innocents by both, describing their actions as unambiguously 'anti-Islamic'. He fears that such violence might exacerbate in the future, with rival Islamic groups, representing different sectarian formations, fighting each other. 'The gun culture has become so deeply ingrained that, who knows, Kashmir might go the Pakistan or Afghanistan way, with Shi'as and Sunnis and Wahhabis training their guns on each other'.

As a traditional Islamic scholar, T's interaction with the local Hindus is somewhat limited. Yet, he insists on the need for harmonious relations with the Hindus, and laments that in the course of the ongoing violence in Kashmir Hindu-Muslim relations have drastically deteriorated. Yet, he believes that 'ordinary' Hindus and Muslims simply want to live in peace and carry on with their lives. He tells me about his experiences of living in a largely Hindu town, where there are few Muslims. In the years that he has lived not once was he targeted by the local Hindus or made to feel unsafe. 'Given what has been happening in Kashmir', he says, 'they might have been expected to hate me, to create trouble for me, but that wasn't the case. In fact, they treat me with respect'.

H is a Muslim college student in Jammu. His family are, as he puts it, 'staunch Barelvis', and he counts himself as an ardent Barelvi as well. He has not had a formal Islamic education, but through books and personal meetings with scholars associated with a particular Barelvi organization he has received a fairly good knowledge of his faith.

We talk about this Barelvi organization, and he tells me about how, in its own way, it is trying to promote peace in Kashmir. The organization has arranged numerous public meetings in different parts of Jammu and Kashmir, where Barelvi '*ulama*', including many from other parts of India, deliver lectures on various aspects of the Prophet Muhammad's life and teachings. The focus of these lectures is often on moral and social issues, particularly issues of contemporary concern. H names a number of such issues, from female infanticide and dowry to inter-communal amity and the need for peace. 'We cannot directly speak out against the militants or they will kill us', he says. 'So we hold out the model of the Prophet as a way to counter their propaganda'.

H insists that Islam, as he sees it, and peace between the different communities, are indivisible. When the Prophet was born, he says his mother, Amna, saw angels planting white flags, symbolising peace. Hence, Muslims must struggle for peace and against the misuse of religion that promotes violence against innocent people. One of the meanings of 'Islam' in Arabic is peace, he says, but adds that this does not mean a passive acceptance of things as they are, but, rather struggling, through morally justifiable means against oppression. This includes working for the rights of non-Muslims as well. To illustrate the point he tells me the story of a property dispute between a Muslim and a non-Muslim. They appeared before the Prophet, who decided in favour of the latter, although the Muslim had expected that he would rule in his favour simply because he was a Muslim. 'The Prophet stressed the rights of one's neighbours, and these include non-Muslims, and said that he who gives unnecessary sorrow to his neighbour would go to hell', H says gravely.

H stresses the importance of personal behaviour and morality, arguing that calls for *jihad* and an Islamic state are meaningless if their advocates do not practise 'genuine' spirituality themselves. 'Your behaviour with others should be such that people think that it is because of Islam that you are good, not, as now, that you are bad because of Islam', he says. He critiques certain radical Islamist groups in Kashmir, whom he

describes as ‘Wahhabis’ and who, he says, are really political and not religious outfits, although they assume an ‘Islamic’ garb. ‘They walk in the path of money, not of Islam’, he says. In the name of *jihad*, he laments, ‘they have finished us off’. In contrast to their actions, he says, the ‘real *jihad*’ is to ‘develop a proper Islamic character and to convey the message of Islam to others’. He cites the example of the widely revered Sufi saint, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, as a ‘true *mujahid*’. Through his message of love and peace, he says, scores of people were attracted to Islam. In contrast to the Khwaja, the activities of several radical Islamist outfits have only succeeded in further repelling non-Muslims from Islam, as a result of which they see Muslims as ‘terrorists’. Rather than their activities being a genuine *jihad*, they are, he says, a ‘great strife’ or *fitna*, that has no legitimacy in Islam at all.

Like most other Muslims, H believes that Islam alone is the way to salvation, but, at the same time, he insists that Islamic missionary work has no room for violence. Rather, he argues that it is only through promoting love and peace that others can be receptive to the message of Islam, adding that this is precisely what the Prophet also sought to do. Non-Muslims are free to accept or reject Islam, and in no case should they be forced to do so.

H tells me that he has ‘nothing to do with politics’, but he believes that a solution to the issue of Kashmir must have the consent of all the various communities in the state. Perhaps, he says, joint rule by India and Pakistan for a few years is a possible solution. He thinks that many Kashmiris might prefer independence, rather than being ruled by Delhi or Islamabad, but says that this option is not without its dangers. In an independent Kashmir, he warns, there is a likelihood of civil war breaking out and sectarian violence spearheaded by ‘Wahhabis’, whom he describes, echoing the views of many other Barelvi scholars, as ‘blasphemers against the Prophet’ (*gustakh-i rasul*), accusing them of being ‘imperialist creations’ in order to set Muslims against each other.



R is a practising Sufi, and is the custodian of a large *dargah* in Jammu. Like many other Barelvi scholars in Jammu, he, too, thinks that the Kashmir issue is political and not religious.

‘No religion, properly interpreted, allows for killing innocent people’, R explains as I settle down on the mattress on the floor of his room, declining a chair that he offers me. In Islam, he tells me, one is allowed to take to arms only in self-defence, when one’s life or faith are under threat. Prior to the outbreak of the militant movement, the Kashmiri Muslims enjoyed freedom of both, he says and pauses, leaving me free to draw my own conclusion. ‘Yes, there have been human rights violations by the armed forces as well’, he admits when I point this out, ‘but the trouble started with the militants, so it’s not entirely the fault of the army’.

R is decidedly opposed to the Islamists, including the Lashkar-i Tayyeba and the Jama‘at-i Islami, groups whom he dubs together as ‘Wahhabis’. He denies that they are Islamic at all, and says that their demand for an Islamic state in Kashmir is untenable. ‘If Muslims demand an Islamic state in Kashmir of the sort that the Wahhabis want’, he says, ‘how can one deny Hindu groups the same right in India?’. He points out that the ‘Wahhabis’ and the Hindu right-wing feed on each other, both being ‘thoroughly anti-religious’ while claiming to be the greatest defenders of their respective faiths and communities. He also tells me that the Islamist militants in Kashmir have no concern about the grave consequences Kashmir’s accession to Pakistan or becoming independent might have for the Muslims living in the rest of India, who, he says, number 14 times the Kashmiri Muslim population. It is bound to lead to a strengthening of right-wing Hindu forces, he points out, who might wreak further havoc on the Indian Muslims.

R recognises that the actions of the militants have had a tremendously negative impact on non-Muslim perceptions of Islam and its adherents. ‘Ordinary people cannot distinguish us from the Wahhabis and so they now think that all Muslims are terrorists’, he says in despair. Yet, despite what he calls the relentless ‘un-Islamic’ propaganda of ‘Wahhabi’ groups, he believes that the majority of the Kashmiri Muslims continue to deeply revere the Sufis. The ‘Wahhabis’ recognise this, and that is why, he claims, they do not openly reveal their beliefs or preach their views, such as their opposition to Sufism and the cults associated with their shrines. Were they to reveal their true beliefs, he says, they would be stiffly opposed by the Kashmiri Muslims themselves.

As R sees it, the ‘Wahhabi’ militants lack true piety, despite their claims of being true *mujahids*. Several of them are involved in militancy just

to make money, he says. And some of them, particularly the leaders of militant groups in Pakistan, have raked in millions in the name of *jihad*, he assures me. ‘Their politics are totally against the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet. They say, no matter what happens, even if innocent people are raped or killed, we want to set up our own government. Surely, the Prophet did not act in this way!’ He refers to Pakistan as an example of a failed state, despite its claims of being a model Islamic country. ‘You can’t impose an Islamic system by force like that’, he says.

It is not easy for people like him to take on the militants directly, says R. Some, including moderate Muslim leaders (he cites the late Qazi Nisar, the Mirwaiz of south Kashmir as an example), who dared to do so have paid for this with their lives. Rather, R says, he tries to do this indirectly, by telling Muslims about the Prophet and the Sufis and their message of love and tolerance and the meaning of the ‘true *jihad*’. ‘I point out that we must follow the Prophet alone in all matters, and behave as he did’, he explains. ‘That means that we must work for love and peace. That is precisely what the Sufis, who brought Islam to Kashmir, did, and we should walk in their path’.

R insists on the need for Muslim scholars to reach out to people of other communities. ‘We live in a multi-religious society and so must have good relations with each other. It is only through love and in a peaceful environment that we can disabuse others of the misunderstandings that they have of Islam’, he says. He admits the need for organised work for promoting inter-religious harmony, noting that hardly any efforts have been made in this regard in Jammu. ‘Each of us seems to be so obsessed with our own communities that we just do not think beyond’, he bemoans.



A is a Muslim school teacher from a village near Kishtwar, in the mountainous Doda district. I met him one afternoon at a tea stall outside the Jami‘a mosque in the largely Muslim locality of Mohalla Khatikan in Jammu. He looked plainly tired and harried as he sipped his tea and read out a newspaper story about the killing of a young man in Doda. Apparently, the youth had been kidnapped by a group of militants belonging to the dreaded Deobandi Harkat ul-Mujahidin, who kept him with them for a month. He was then killed by them because he had opposed the marriage of his relative with a Harkat militant.

‘We simply cannot do anything because we are poor people’, A says with an immense sigh. ‘On the one hand the army terrorises us, and on the other hand the militants. We can’t afford to speak up against either of the two’.

It is not just the Hindus who are being targeted by the militants, he explains. In fact, most of those killed in his area, by both the militants and the army, are Muslims. ‘And that means’, he declares emphatically, ‘that this is not a *jihad* at all’. ‘In a true *jihad*’, he says, ‘innocents cannot be targeted, women cannot be raped, you cannot steal other’s money or property, but this is precisely what is happening’.

A’s father is said to have been a practising Sufi, and A has inherited from him a passionate commitment to the Sufi way. This explains his strident opposition to the Islamist militants. ‘I used to firmly support the cause of Kashmiri independence’, he tells me, ‘but seeing what these so-called *mujahids* have done, murdering and looting in God’s name, I have come to the firm conclusion that it is best for us to be with India’. ‘If ever Kashmir becomes independent or joins Pakistan we will descend into civil war’, he warns. Denouncing Islamist radicals, he argues, ‘They claim to be working for an Islamic state, but that’s all hot air. We’ve seen what their agenda is from their actions’. And this includes what he sees as the Islamists’ fierce hostility to Sufism, or what A defines as ‘true’ Islam. ‘Although the militants don’t openly say so for fear of losing public support, we know that they see Sufism as un-Islamic and regard us as little better than polytheists. How can we trust or support such people?’, he asks.

As a devout Muslim, A sees as his primary task the mission of *tabligh* or communicating the message of Islam to others. That, he says, was the Prophet’s mission in life, not the capture of political power. The best and most effective way to convey Islam to others, he says, is through one’s own character. ‘If people see how noble and kind you are because you are a good Muslim, they would automatically be attracted to the faith’, he argues. He sees the militants as not only having no interest whatsoever in *tabligh* and, in fact, as actually working to defeat all possibilities for attracting others to Islam. ‘The militants have created such a hatred in the minds of the Hindus here about Islam that no Hindu would at all be interested in, leave alone attracted to, Islam’, he rues. He refers to Islamist ideologues and militant activists as endlessly proclaiming that Islam has the answer to all the ills of humankind, but

then hurriedly adds that obviously no Hindu would ever accept this claim since the militants themselves refuse to act according to Islamic principles. ‘The Hindus answer, and rightly so, that all these wonderful things about Islam should first be practised by the militants themselves, and only then would they care to lend an ear to their propaganda’, he says.



Z is a Shi‘a Muslim and works in a government department in Jammu. He tells me about the small Shi‘a community in the town, which comprises of some 40-odd families. Most of them are Kashmiris and Ladakhis, there being very few local Shi‘as.

Most Shi‘as in Jammu and Kashmir, Z says, think that remaining with India is the best option for them. If Kashmir joins Pakistan, they feel, the Kashmiri Shi‘as are bound to be targeted by militant Islamist groups, as is the case in Pakistan today. ‘In Pakistan Shi‘as worshipping in mosques and *imambaras* are gunned down in cold blood’, Z tells me. ‘Radical Deobandi and other such groups there are even calling for them to be declared as non-Muslims like the Ahmadis’. ‘On the other hand’, he says, ‘no such thing happens in India, where Shi‘as have complete freedom of religion’.

I ask him if the recent massacre of Muslims in Gujarat does not disprove his point.

‘In Gujarat’, he replies, ‘Muslims were killed indiscriminately, and these included Shi‘as and Sunnis. But in Pakistan, Shi‘as are being singled out for attack, which, in a sense, is probably worse from the Shi‘a point of view’.

No religion, Z argues, gives permission to oppress others, but that is precisely what some Islamists are doing in Kashmir and the RSS is doing in the rest of India. The conflict in Kashmir, therefore, is not a *jihad* but simply instigated by politicians and ‘pseudo-religious’ leaders to promote their own gains. For this they deliberately give a ‘wrong’ interpretation of the Islamic concept of *jihad*. According to the Shi‘a faith, Z explains, *jihad* can only be declared by a leading Shi‘a scholar (*maraja* or *mujtahid*). No Shi‘a *mujtahid*, he adds, has so far blessed the struggle in Kashmir as a *jihad*. Yet, Shi‘as in Kashmir fear to speak out against the militants for fear of being killed. If the ‘Wahhabis’ are not countered, Z says thoughtfully, they might unleash a wave of killings

against the Shi‘as if Kashmir joins Pakistan or becomes independent, as the Taliban did when it captured Afghanistan or as some radical groups in Pakistan are presently doing. He tells me of how the Shi‘as have for long been oppressed in Saudi Arabia by the Wahhabis, who consider them as heretics.

Z says that Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Kashmir have historically been tension-ridden but are now generally peaceful, although suspicions still remain. He refers to several hardliner Islamist outfits that are vehemently anti-Shi‘a. He singles out, in particular, what he call as the ‘Wahhabis’, groups, funded, so he claims, by the Saudis, who preach anti-Shi‘a hatred. This propaganda may not have been as successful as was intended, he says, but ordinary Sunnis in many places are said to continue to hold virulently anti-Shi‘a views. ‘Many Sunnis, particularly in the Kashmir valley, believe that Shi‘as spit into the food that they offer Sunnis and pronounce ritual curses, because of which Sunnis refuse to eat their food’. ‘The intention in spreading such baseless rumours’, he explains, ‘is probably to ensure that ordinary Sunnis do not befriend Shi‘as’.

Anti-Shi‘a propaganda has, Z says, not impacted much on Sunni-Shi‘a relations in Jammu, and there have been no violent clashes between them so far. However, in the course of the last several years, primarily as a result of the growing Deobandi, and to a lesser extent, Ahl-i Hadith, influence among the Sunnis of Jammu, Sunni attendance at Shi‘a *majalis* (religious gatherings) and *azadari* (mourning rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain) has markedly declined. The Deobandis and the Ahl-i Hadith (in contrast to the Barelvis) castigate these practices as ‘un-Islamic’. Z hastens to add, however, that the local Sunnis and Shi‘as both wish to ensure peaceful relations in Jammu, and suggests the need for the ‘*ulama* and other leaders of both communities to work together to combat sectarian hatred. He admits that little has been done on this front, however, although he does mention the efforts of a certain Barelvi organisation headed by Haji Abdul Majid, a local community leader, that organises a public meeting every year to mark the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, grandson of the Prophet. This annual ‘Shahid-i Azam Conference’, organised in the month of *Muharram*, is attended by Shi‘a and Barelvi ‘*ulama* from Jammu and Kashmir and other states, who travel around the Jammu province addressing lectures devoted to the Imam’s life and teachings.





M is a leading Muslim activist in Jammu. He is equally critical of Hindutva groups as he is of radical Islamists, such as the Jama'at-i Islami and the Lashkar. The latter, he tells me, 'do not reflect the Islam of the vast majority of ordinary Kashmiris'. 'They are simply political outfits in the garb of religion', he insists.

M is a forceful critic of the notion of an Islamic state, which forms the central pillar of the Islamist project. 'Before 1947 the Muslim League claimed that Islam could not survive without a separate Muslim state of Pakistan, but see what Pakistan has become today', he points out. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan, he says, is neither truly 'Islamic' nor a genuine republic. The 'two-nation' theory of the League – that the Hindus and Muslims of India were two separate nations – fell apart no sooner had Pakistan been established, with mounting ethnic tensions finally leading to the creation of Bangladesh. 'Just because people adhere to the same religion it does not mean that they belong to the same nation', he says. Likewise, he adds, people of different religions can indeed live together harmoniously as members of a common nation-state, provided, of course, that justice is ensured and no community is discriminated against. It is completely misleading, he insists, to speak of the Muslims of Jammu and Kashmir as a single, homogenous community. Like other communities, they are divided on lines of ethnicity, language, region and sect. 'The Kashmiri Muslims, the Dogra Muslims, the Gujjar and Bakkarwal Muslims, the Shi'as of Kargil', he says, 'each think of themselves as different communities and do not speak with the same voice'.

As a liberal, as he calls himself, M is against the idea of Kashmir joining Pakistan. He predicts that if Kashmir joins Pakistan, as the Islamists insist it must, it would meet the same fate as East Bengal. He argues that restoration of the pre-1953 status of Jammu and Kashmir as an autonomous entity within the Indian federation might be a solution acceptable to many Kashmiris, although he adds that the Indian state has shown little interest in moving towards such a solution. At the same time, he insists, a solution cannot be imposed on the people of the state. Rather, he pleads for what he calls a 'trilateral settlement', in which the people of Jammu and Kashmir should also be recognised as a party to the dispute. 'Our state is not a piece of real estate, whose future can be decided by two outside parties, India and Pakistan', he cautions me. A lasting solution to the problem necessitates that the views of all communities in the state, and not just of the Muslims of

the Valley, be taken into account. He admits that getting the different communities to come to a consensus is difficult, but suggests that the initiative must be taken, and in this, moderate religious leaders can have an important role to play. He also pleads for greater contact and exchanges between people on both sides of the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir so that they can dialogue with each other in order to come up with a possible solution.

One possible solution of the Kashmir question, M says, is an independent Jammu and Kashmir. Such a state would be necessarily a secular one, and would guarantee equal rights to all its citizens. Yet, he says, although this sounds fine in theory, it would be accompanied by intractable problems. For one thing, the non-Muslim communities in the state will probably reject the scheme outright. For another, granting independence might further strengthen anti-Muslim forces in India, leading to unimaginable bloodshed. M tells me that this must be avoided at any cost, and so is hesitant to endorse Kashmir's separation from India. Yet, he also admits that many Kashmiri Muslim leaders see independence as the only way out. 'They just are not sensitive at all to the aspirations of the non-Muslim communities in the state and to the Muslims living in the rest of India', he confesses.

M argues that the Kashmir issue is political, religious and communal, and hence insists that its resolution cannot be left to politicians alone. 'It is imperative', he stresses, 'for moderate religious leaders to also engage in the peace process'. 'We cannot wait for politicians to solve the issue, for they have a vested interest in perpetuating it', he says, adding that unless 'ordinary' people from the different communities begin to take it upon themselves to work for peace and inter-communal dialogue, peace cannot be worked out. Since the Kashmir issue is generally framed in religious or communal terms, by both Hindus and Muslims, he says, it is necessary for religious leaders to speak out against communal hatred and the use of religious appeals to foment strife. This, however, is not happening, he laments. 'Muslims and Hindus have such terrible misunderstandings about each other', he tells me, 'but there is absolutely no organised work underway to bring them to sort out their differences'. He cannot think of a single voluntary agency in Jammu, or a single professor at Jammu University or any Jammu-based journalists, barring a few exceptions, who have organised any programmes for inter-communal harmony. Inter-religious dialogue meetings, even where, as he puts it, religious leaders 'praise their own

religions, talk peace and pat each other on the back and depart', are almost unheard of in Jammu, M says. Most religious leaders, he claims, are simply not interested in peace and dialogue. Rather, he says, they have a vested interest in perpetuating inter-communal differences, for otherwise their own positions of authority would be threatened. Many of them are 'really not religious at all', and are 'simply into the business of making money and fame in the name of religion', so why, he asks, should they be interested in inter-faith dialogue at all?



The Ahmadis are followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908), a Punjabi scholar who claimed to be the promised messiah of the Muslims and Christians and the *kalki avatar* of the Hindus. For this claim he was branded as a heretic and an apostate by other Muslims. After Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's death, the Ahmadi movement split into two. One group, the majority, believed that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a prophet (*nabi*), while the latter claimed that he was simply an Islamic reformer (*musleh*) and a renewer of the faith (*mujaddid*). The former are generally described (by their detractors) as Qadianis, and the latter are known as the Lahoris, although both groups refuse these labels and define themselves simply as Ahmadi Muslims.

The Ahmadi community in Jammu consists of both Lahoris and Qadianis. There are some 30 Qadiani Ahmadi families in the town, of which three are locals, while the others are recent settlers from Poonch, Rajouri, Doda and Kashmir. In the winters, when the state capital shifts to Jammu, they are joined by a few fellow Qadiani Ahmadis from Kashmir who are employed in various government departments. Although the local Muslims do not consider them as Muslims, there have been no violent conflicts between them, and their relations with the local Hindus, too, are fairly tension free.

In his late 20s, S is a leading Qadiani Ahmadi community activist. 'Our motto is love for all and hatred for none', he explains as he beckons me to a chair, reading out from a poster on the wall behind him in his dark, dimly lit office. 'All creatures are members of God's family', he says, quoting a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. Because the Ahmadi community in Jammu is small and because of the ongoing violence in the region, he says, they have not been actively engaged in promoting inter-faith dialogue, but he hastens to provide a long list of such activities that the Ahmadi authorities at Qadian, in the Indian

Punjab, have been engaged in. Prominent among these is the annual inter-religious conference held in the last week of December in Qadian, to which people of different faith traditions are invited to speak and exchange views on a range of issues of common concern, particularly on the need for inter-communal harmony.

S hands me a pamphlet in Urdu, titled *Paigham-i Sulh* ('The Message of Peace'), which he explains was penned by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in order to bring Hindus and Muslims to a common understanding to respect each other's faiths. In this pamphlet, S tells me, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad argued that it was only if and when Hindus and Muslims agreed to accept and revere each other's religious figures that the communal problem could be resolved. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad himself made a bold step in that direction by claiming that Rama, Krishna and Buddha were actually prophets sent by God, although those who later claimed to be their followers had distorted much of their teachings. He quoted the Qur'an as stating that God had sent prophets to every people, and argued that it was thus improbable, if not impossible, that no prophets had appeared in India as well. He expected the Hindus to reciprocate and accept Muhammad, too, as a prophet, claiming that this would pave the way for Hindus and Muslims to recognise the merits of each other's faiths.

The Ahmadis, S tells me, make it a point to stress their belief in Krishna, Rama and Buddha as prophets when interacting with Hindus. This, he says, often comes as a surprise for many Hindus who, he says, believe that all Muslims are violently opposed to Hindu religious figures. 'In our gatherings we raise slogans like *Hazrat Ramchandrajai Ki Jai* ('Victory to the Revered Ram Chandrajai') and *Hazrat Buddh Alaihisalaam Zindabad* ('Long Live the Revered Buddha, on Whom be Peace')', he says. Some Ahmadis, he reveals, much to my surprise, have even named their children after Ram and Krishna.

As on the issue of Hindu religious figures, the Ahmadi position on *jihad* is in marked contrast to that of many other Muslim groups, S explains. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad had argued that Islam had no place for violence as a means for spreading the faith. He explained that at a time, such as under British rule in India, when all communities were free to practice and propagate their religion, violent struggle was illegitimate. Although he did not reject the notion of *jihad* outright, he explained it as a spiritual, as opposed to violent, struggle or peaceful missionary work. In arguing this, he was, of course, not alone. Several

Indian Muslim leaders, most notably Sayyed Ahmad Khan, founder of the Aligarh movement, had argued on similar lines. Today, however, S says, the Ahmadis' position on *jihad* is routinely invoked by their Muslim opponents to argue the claim of the Ahmadis being 'British agents', and of having been deliberately created and promoted in order to weaken the Muslims by denying the legitimacy of physical *jihad*.

I ask S what he feels about the ongoing militant movement in Kashmir, which several Islamist groups hail as a legitimate *jihad*. Rather than answering the question directly, he replies that many Islamist outfits promote a distorted understanding of *jihad*, which has no basis in the Qur'an and the tradition (*sunnat*) of the Prophet. Because of this, he says, Islam is being given a 'bad name', so much so that, 'almost every Hindu on the street thinks that Islam is synonymous with terrorism'. 'In Islam', he explains, quoting a saying particularly popular among the Sufis, 'the highest form of *jihad* is the struggle against the self (*nafs*)'. For the first thirteen years of his prophetic career in Mecca, the Prophet, he tells me, suffered immense persecution but God did not give him permission to react with violence. It was only later, in Medina, that God permitted the Muslims to take up arms, but only in self-defence. This means, S says, that Muslim and Hindu militants who kill innocent people in the name of religion are actually 'criminals in the eyes of God'. The Qur'an, he tells me, explicitly states that to kill an innocent person is tantamount to slaughtering the whole of humanity. On the other hand, he adds, 'to save innocent human lives is a major form of *jihad*'.

S is, expectedly, reluctant to discuss Kashmir politics, as indeed most Muslims in Jammu, living as a small minority, seem to be. He does, however, admit that most, if not all, Kashmiri Ahmadis are opposed to joining Pakistan, particularly because of the oppressive conditions under which the Ahmadis there live. 'They can be arrested simply for calling their place of prayer a mosque', he says, throwing up his hands in despair. On the other hand, he says, in India the Ahmadis enjoy freedom to practise and propagate their faith. He does not openly advocate Kashmir's accession to India, but if he were to decide between India and Pakistan his choice is obvious. 'Love of the country is part of the faith', he answers diplomatically when I ask him his position on the matter. 'Our spiritual leader has instructed us that we must respect and obey the political authorities in the countries where we live and try and reform them through peaceful persuasion, not through violence'.

A young man interrupts our conversation, bearing a tray with cups of tea and saucers laden with sweets. He introduces himself as a college student, and joins in the discussion. ‘Most of my friends are Hindus’, he says. ‘Because Muslims have been taught that Ahmadis are enemies of Islam, I have almost no Muslim friends’, he tells me. He agrees with S that no Ahmadi would wish Kashmir to join Pakistan. He rummages through a pile of books and hands me a leaflet describing the imprisonment of an Ahmadi in Pakistan for printing a wedding invitation card with a verse from the Qur’an printed on it. ‘How would any Ahmadi here ever want to live in a country like that?’ he asks in anguish. Although he insists that he is, as he puts it, ‘100 per cent Indian’, he is not quite sure if some Kashmiri Ahmadis (as opposed to Ahmadis from Jammu) would rather live in an independent Kashmir. While he himself would prefer Kashmir to be with India, he says that the majority of the Kashmiri Muslims would probably disagree. He sees a possible solution to the vexed dispute in the creation of an independent Kashmir, with Jammu and Ladakh remaining with India.

S nods his head, probably in agreement, but adds that merely changing political boundaries cannot permanently solve the deeply rooted problem. More important than that, he insists, is winning peoples’ hearts, bringing communities closer to each other so that they can recognise their common humanity. ‘Only through mutual love can we solve our problems’, he says, taking hold of my hand and giving it a tight, friendly squeeze. ‘Let me recount one incident to explain what I mean’. He tells me a story of an imam of an Ahmadi mosque in a village in Jammu who left the key to the mosque with his Hindu neighbour before departing on a journey. When he returned, he discovered to his surprise that his neighbour had swept the mosque, dusted the carpets and had lighted incense sticks – his way of expressing his respect and devotion.

‘Imagine what a powerful impact this would have had on the imam’, S asks. I visualise the story in my mind for a while, and then I nod in agreement.



There are some 20 Lahori Ahmadi families in Jammu, and the community has a small mosque in the town, adjacent to the shrine of Pir Mitha. Like the Qadiani Ahmadis, the Lahoris are considered as non-Muslims by most other Muslims, although they claim to be ‘true’ Muslims. Unlike the Qadianis, however, they consider other Muslims as genuine Muslims as well.

I met with a group of Lahoris at their mosque after the congregational prayers one Friday. K, a middle-aged Lahori, is a government servant, and is also involved in various community activities. Quoting from a book by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad he says, ‘One cannot be a true Muslim if one does not believe in all the prophets of God. This means that Muslims must also believe in Jesus, Moses, Rama and Krishna, as all of them were prophets’. At the same time, he asserts, Muslims believe that Muhammad was God’s final messenger, sent in continuation of the mission of the previous prophets. ‘The followers of many of the other prophets tampered with their scriptures and began to worship them as gods’, he adds. ‘That is why Muhammad was sent as the last messenger, to preach true monotheism’.

K dismisses the argument made by many Muslim detractors of the Ahmadis that because Mirza Ghulam Ahmad forbade armed *jihad* against the British he was an ‘imperialist agent’. He argues that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was not alone in insisting that revolt against political authorities was illegal if Muslims were free to practice and propagate their faith. Indeed, he insists, several other Muslim leaders, in the past and even today, maintain precisely the same position. ‘Only when the rulers forbid you from praying can you declare *jihad*’, he maintains.

But what about Kashmir, I ask him. Surely, Muslims are allowed to pray in Kashmir? How, then, can the militant movement be considered a *jihad*? K, visibly embarrassed, seeks to evade the question. ‘Some Muslims say that because there is freedom of religion in Kashmir the revolt there cannot be said to be a *jihad*’, he admits. At the same time he adds, ‘Other Muslims, including even some Lahoris, believe that *jihad* can be declared if one’s land is forcibly occupied by others. Since they hold that Kashmir has been forcibly occupied by India they consider their struggle a legitimate *jihad*’.

X, a Lahori youth, nods in agreement, but interjects. ‘We need the *jihad* of the pen today, not the *jihad* of the sword’. The greatest *jihad*, he tells me, is to spread the message of the Qur’an – in other words to engage in missionary work among non-Muslims. ‘For that’, he argues, ‘we need a climate of peace so that others would be willing to listen to us’. ‘But this is not what is happening in Kashmir today’, he insists. No Kashmiri militant group, he tells me, has ever sought to engage in missionary work among non-Muslims. ‘In any case’, he asks, ‘which non-Muslim would ever be willing to listen to them? They have blood of innocents on their hands’.

X seems to disagree with T, his colleague, also present on the occasion who advocates independence for Kashmir. 'In a true *jihad* no innocents must be killed, but that is what is happening in Kashmir', he argues, much to the chagrin of T, who murmurs in protest.

'Look,' X goes on, 'we Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was a perfect model for us, and so we must follow him in every regard'. The Prophet, he tells me, was faced with stiff opposition from the polytheist Qur'aish tribe of Mecca, who forced him and his disciples to shift to Medina. Instead of launching a war against the Qur'aish the Prophet entered into a peace treaty with them at a place called Hudaibiyah. Because of the peace that this treaty ensured, Muslims were able to engage in missionary work among the Arabs, as a result of which Islam witnessed a rapid expansion. Citing this as a precedent, X argues, 'A solution to the Kashmir question can come about only through peace, not through the sword. In a climate of peace we will be able to engage in missionary work, and one day all of India might become Muslim and the Kashmir question will automatically be solved'.

But what if, I ask him, the non-Muslims of India do not choose convert to Islam. Would he still advocate peace for its own sake? X hesitates for a while, and answers, 'If you look at human history you will come to the conclusion that tangled political problems have never been solved through violence. Violence only further exacerbates the problem. In a climate of peace those who hold different positions on Kashmir would be free to advocate them and influence public opinion. Gradually, then, things will begin to change'.

X identifies himself as an 'Indian'. 'I have full respect for the Indian Constitution, which has given all citizens the freedom to practice and propagate their religion', he says. He contrasts this with the situation in Pakistan, where the Ahmadis, both Lahoris and Qadianis, are legally treated as non-Muslims and are deprived of many basic rights. He fears that in an independent Kashmir the Ahmadis would be subject to similar treatment.

Not everyone in the group agrees with X. T enters into a friendly argument with him. 'No', says T, 'We Kashmiris are different, and I would rather live under a Muslim government, even if it is controlled by non-Ahmadis'. He advocates an independent and secular Kashmir where all communities would enjoy equal rights. 'Don't cook *pilau* in the air!' X interrupts and tells him, 'Do you think that the Islamists would ever allow that if ever Kashmir became free?'.



Noises of protest as well as support emerge from the group, as the conversation tapers off with the call to prayer floating out of the microphone atop the mosque.



Recent decades have witnessed the emergence and growing presence of the virulently anti-Sufi Ahl-i Hadith movement in the Jammu region, although the sect still has only a marginal presence here. The Ahl-i Hadith believes that Sufism is wholly ‘anti-Islamic’, claiming that it was a later development that has no sanction in the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. As many Ahl-i Hadith activists see it, Sufism is a result of a ‘conspiracy’ allegedly hatched by the ‘enemies of Islam’ to destroy Islam from within, to lead Muslims away from the path of the Prophet and, in particular, to rob them of the spirit of militant *jihad* by preaching pacifism. Strictly literalist, the Ahl-i Hadith insists that Muslims should literally follow every word contained in the Qur’an and in the corpus of Prophetic traditions or Hadith.

H is a *maulvi* attached to an Ahl-i Hadith mosque in a township in the Jammu province. I met him at a tea-shop in Jammu, where I found him speaking to a group of villagers against the practice of visiting the shrines of the saints. ‘This is pure idolatry, which Muslims have borrowed from the Hindus’, he forcefully declaims, arguing that the punishment for this would be burning in the fires of hell. ‘That is what is written in the Qur’an and Hadith’, he announces when one listener objects to his statement. Evidently, the villagers are not enthused by his lecture, and they soon depart.

Left alone with H, I talk to him about the Ahl-i Hadith and its work in the Jammu region. ‘We are here to teach true Islam’, he tells me. He claims that the other Muslim groups, such as the Barelvis and the Deobandis are not ‘true Muslims’ at all. ‘They must be brought to the fold of genuine monotheism’, he passionately insists. Clearly, that is a task that H has set for himself. As for the Shi’as and the Ahmadis, they are, he tells me in no uncertain terms, ‘the worst of the apostates, agents of the despicable Jews’. Like non-Muslims in general, their adherents, too, he assures me, would be punished in hell. He does not seem to think that by its vehement propaganda against the other Muslim groups Ahl-i Hadith is actually setting Muslims against each other. ‘They aren’t genuine Muslims at all’, he retorts when I ask him this, ‘so how can we be accused of dividing the Muslim *ummah*?’

The Ahl-i Hadith are notorious for their quarrelsomeness but even by general Ahl-i Hadith standards H strikes me as unusually cantankerous and judgmental. I am not surprised, then, when I discover his sympathies for the radical Islamist Lashkar-i Tayyeba, which is associated with the Ahl-i Hadith in Pakistan and which is perhaps the most formidable militant group active in Kashmir today. H brushes aside my question about the killings of innocent civilians, Hindus and Muslims, by Lashkar fighters. ‘That is all Indian media propaganda’, he declares. ‘The Lashkar activists are motivated solely by Islam and the desire for the hereafter and they conduct their warfare in accordance with the rules of the Prophet’. ‘Not a single innocent person has been killed by the Lashkar’, he insists, flatly denying my claims to the contrary. He, however, admits that some people have taken up the gun to settle personal scores or to loot, and have killed innocent people, and that they have ‘wrongly’ claimed to be members of the Lashkar. The Lashkar is not to blame for their crimes, he pleads.

I, of course, disagree, and point to a report in that very day’s newspaper that speaks of Lashkar activists in Doda slitting the throat of a Muslim farmer for allegedly being a government informer. ‘No, no’, H angrily replies, ‘this is all nonsense’. ‘Why are you asking me all these questions?’ he asks sternly. ‘Are you a government agent or what?’

I reply that I am just a journalist. I, however, think it wise to let him proceed, for I am not out to convert him (much as I wish to) but, rather, to learn about how he views the Kashmir conflict.

H makes no bones about his opposition to Indian rule in Kashmir. ‘Why blame only the militants for what is happening?’ he asks. He points out that ‘since 1947 there have been several thousand communal riots in India, in which Muslims have been the worst sufferers, having lost thousands upon thousands of lives’. I nod my head in agreement. The continued injustice towards Muslims in India has convinced many Kashmiri Muslims to feel that they have no future in this country, he says – an obvious enough point, in a sense. Since the vast majority of the Kashmiris are Muslims, he argues, many of them believe that it is ‘but natural’ that Kashmir should be part of Pakistan.

H hurriedly adds that that is not necessarily his own personal opinion. He smiles but says nothing when I point out that the Lashkar website describes the conflict in Kashmir as a legitimate *jihad*, the ‘Battle of

India' (*ghazva-i hind*), of which the Prophet had allegedly predicted that Muslims who participated in it would go to heaven.<sup>9</sup>

Although he does not conceal his sympathies for the Lashkar, it appears that H does not agree with them entirely. He does not concur, or so he says, with the Lashkar's claim that the conflict in Kashmir is a cosmic struggle between good and evil, Islam and infidelity. 'It is a political, and not a religious issue', he stresses, pointing out that in contrast to the Lashkar, several Indian Ahl-i Hadith leaders have also argued on similar lines. At the same time he refuses to recognise the obvious fact that the Lashkar is vociferously anti-Hindu. 'It is not against the Hindus at all', he seeks to convince me. 'You've been reading all the wrong newspapers, because in a truly Islamic state religious minorities will be allowed to practice their faiths'. Had the Lashkar seen all Hindus as enemies, he claims, there would have been no Hindus left in Kashmir. 'In every street in Kashmir you have Bihari and Bengali labourers. There's a large and prosperous Sikh community in Kashmir', he says.

But what about the Kashmiri Pandits, I ask H. 'That is a different issue altogether', he replies. 'They were the elites of Kashmiri society, and Jagmohan forced them to flee'. They were, he claims, 'tempted' by 'generous offers of government assistance' if they left the Valley, in order to give the militant movement a 'communal colour' and 'a bad name'. He refuses to recognise the obvious sufferings of many Pandits who had been forced out of their homes. 'No, in fact they've prospered after leaving', he counters. 'They now occupy high posts in Delhi and Bombay and even abroad'.

I realise it is futile to continue that line of inquiry for he simply refuses to find any merit in my arguments. I ask him, instead, if he really believes that the Hindus and other non-Muslim minorities would ever agree to join Pakistan or to live in an independent Muslim-dominated state. 'Why not?' he naively replies, 'They will find that Pakistan is a better option for them than India'. After all, he claims, in Pakistan the Hindus are 'very rich, even richer than the Hindu *seths* in Jammu'.

I cannot not help express my disagreement somewhat angrily. 'That's totally wrong', I insist. 'The vast majority of the Pakistani Hindus are landless Dalits in Sind'.

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<sup>9</sup> This was the case till recently, but now the site has undergone major modification in order to downplay the radicalism of the organization in public.

‘You’ve never been to Pakistan’, H retorts at once, ‘so how would you know?’ He then launches on a harangue of the Jews and Christians, who, he claims, have been plotting to blot out Islam from the face of the earth ever since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. In contrast to them, he says, the Hindus are not, as an entire community, ‘enemies of Islam’. Hence, it is perfectly possible for them to live together in the same country. They would be free to practice their own religions, although, he says, Muslims would be free to preach Islam among them, because, he insists, ‘Islam is the only route to salvation in this world and the next’. Ideally, he says, Kashmir should be an independent country, ‘like Nepal’, with open borders, enjoying the same legal status as it did under the Dogra rulers. He does not reply when I ask him what sort of state this would be. He probably believes it should be an Islamic one, ruled strictly in accordance with the Ahl-i Hadith understanding of the *shari‘ah*, which is almost identical with that of the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia.

I am saved from H’s continued bantering by my friend Iqbal, who suddenly appears outside the tea shop where we have been talking. He has come to take me for the Thursday evening gathering at a Sufi shrine. Just to be provocative I tell H where I am heading. He curls up his nose in disgust. ‘My brother’, he says to me, ‘there’s no use going to such dens of idol-worship. Become a Musalman and follow the path of the Prophet. Nothing else can save you’.

I force on a smile, while Iqbal, faithful devotee of the Sufis, winces at H in anger.



N runs a small store in a town in the Jammu district. He has been an acquaintance of mine for several years now. Each time I travel from Jammu to Srinagar or Doda I make it a point to stop in his town and look him up. It is not that I am fond of him at all. To be frank, he repels me with his smug over-confidence, but I find his views interesting in a way. After all, he is an ardent supporter of the Jama‘at-i Islami, and it is not often that one can befriend a hardcore ‘Jama‘ati’.

‘I’ve heard that the government is deliberately promoting the Qadiani sect in Kashmir’, N tells me almost as soon as I enter his shop. Before I can react he hurriedly adds, ‘I’ve also heard that Israeli soldiers are going around villages in Kashmir at night dressed as ghosts to scare

people'. I think he's joking, but he is dead serious. 'Yes', he seeks to assure me; 'This is what I heard, that the government of India has employed these Jewish agents to frighten our people'.

N then launches into a loud, aggressive harangue against the Indian government, the Americans, the Jews and other such 'enemies of Islam' as he calls them. A small crowd gathers in the shop to listen to his speech. He asks me what brings me to his town this time, and I tell him that I want to meet a certain man, who is said to be a Sufi of sorts.

'Oh, that man!' N exclaims with disdain. Probably since the man is an opponent of the Jama'atis he says, 'You can buy all other groups with money and sweet talk but there's only one group that can never be bought'. Predictably, the one group he is referring to is his very own Jama'at-i Islami.

'The Jama'at', N boasts, 'can never waver from the path of Islam'. 'You will not find such dedicated servants of Islam in any other group', he boasts. Several other groups that call themselves 'Muslim', he says, are actually 'creations' of the 'Jews' and other such 'enemies of Islam' or else work, knowingly or unwittingly, to serve their interests. These, according to him, include the Barelvis, the Shi'as and the Ahmadis. The Shi'as, he alleges, 'abuse the companions of the Prophet'; the Barelvis 'supported the British Raj'; and the Ahmadis were 'propped up by the British to divide the Muslims and to destroy the spirit of *jihad*'.

I tell N about the research project I am working on, on peace and religion in Jammu and Kashmir. 'All this is useless', he tells me flatly at once. 'True peace and justice can only be established if India accepts the Qur'an as its constitution and if its rulers become Muslim'. He offers Saudi Arabia as a model for India to emulate. His father, he says, once visited Saudi Arabia and came back with stories of 'true Islamic justice' strictly followed there. He saw, for instance, a thief's hand being chopped off, much to the glee of the large crowd gathered to witness the spectacle. N tells me that India should follow the example of 'Umar, the second Sunni Caliph, who, when he heard that his own son had committed a crime, ordered that he should be flogged with 70 stripes. When, after the thirtieth whipping; his son died, 'Umar ordered that the remaining forty stripes be inflicted on his grave. Or so N claims. In the 'true' Islamic dispensation that he dreams of, N tells me that Muslims who refuse to say their prayers shall be treated as apostates and shall

be killed, and if a man steals food his hand shall be chopped off. I express my alarm, but N defends himself by saying that in the ideal Islamic state that he aspires for the state would provide for the basic needs of all its citizens through the public treasury and, that, therefore, only a habitual or congenital criminal would ever resort to robbery. 'It is not like in your India where criminals roam freely', he says with evident disgust.

Not a single Muslim state in the world, I tell N, is the sort of Islamic utopia that he hungers for, not even Pakistan, which I know he passionately supports. 'Let Pakistan go to hell', he answers. 'Every Muslim, no matter where he or she lives, should work to establish an Islamic state, the system of the Prophet (*nizam-i mustafa*)'. Islam, he tells me, has come to 'conquer the world' (*ghalib hone ke liye*), not to be dominated (*maghlub*) by other ideologies or religions. This is why, he says, the 'enemies of Islam' (here he specifically names the Jews, Christians and Hindus) are 'mortally afraid' of Islam and have been consistently 'conspiring' to eliminate it. It is because of this, he says, that Muslims all over the world are being 'cruelly oppressed'.

I venture to ask him if his claim is true how is it he can speak so freely in his town, which has only a very small Muslim population, almost all its inhabitants being Hindus. It is with great difficulty that I repress the urge to tell him that if he spoke so assertively in many Muslim countries he could be sure that he would have been marched off at once to prison or even to the gallows.

N tells me that Muslims in Kashmir and in India must struggle to establish a state modelled on the one established by the Prophet in Medina more than 1400 years ago. For this purpose they must also engage in missionary work among the Hindus, to bring them to Islam, because, he claims, Islam is 'the only way to salvation in this world and in the world after death'. I tell him that his aggressive ranting and his championing of violence are surely no way to convince others of the claims that he makes on behalf of Islam. The Qu'ran, I point out, tells Muslims that they should preach their faith with 'gentle words'. N, however, rudely cuts me short and blurts, 'Islam tells us that it is our duty to speak the truth boldly before others even if it hurts them'.

I decide that I must have my say now. I simply cannot let N go on. I tell him that if he thinks missionary work is a principle duty incumbent upon all Muslims, the seemingly most vocal champions of Islam in

Kashmir, the Islamist militants, seem to have completely forgotten this fundamental Islamic task. Surely, I say, the killings of innocent people by the militants would only further repel people from Islam rather than attract them towards it. But before I can complete my sentence, N retorts, 'Nowhere in Kashmir have the militants killed any innocent people. You have been fed on wrong propaganda in the newspapers spread by the enemies of Islam'.

When I say that he is talking arrant nonsense he relents somewhat and says, 'It may be that one or two people have disguised themselves as militants and killed others to settle personal scores but they are not true militants'.

The conversation is, of course, getting nowhere, and I decide to leave. N grabs my hand and gives it a firm shake. 'I pray to Allah that the next time we meet you will have the Qur'an in this hand of yours and that you will be a brave soldier of Islam', he says with a supercilious smile.

I do not conceal my anger, but I bid him farewell.

As I walk down from N's shop I am followed by a group of cheerful school boys who have witnessed my heated encounter with N. 'Uncle ji', one of them, a Muslim lad, tells me, 'Please do not mind what that man said. He is notorious for being a stupid loud-mouth'. Another boy, who also happens to be a Muslim, chirps in and says, 'Yes, he is a little mad'.

I cannot suppress my laughter and the children join me, shrieking out in delight.



I met X one Friday afternoon outside a mosque in Jammu after the congregational prayers gave over. X, I had been told, was closely involved with the Jama'at-i Islami of Jammu and Kashmir. I was initially reluctant to meet with him, suspicious that my movements might be monitored by the police, the intelligence agencies or even by the militants themselves. A friend of mine, however, assured me that I had no cause to fear. 'He's quite a sensible person, as you will discover', he told me, 'and his perspective on Kashmir is quite distinct from most other Jama'atis'.

X, as it turned out, is clearly an Islamist with a difference. I spent almost two hours with him as he passionately advocated the case for

an independent Kashmir, while at the same time pleading for peace and bitterly critiquing the militants and the governments of India and Pakistan.

X argues the case for Kashmiri self-determination in both nationalist as well as Islamist terms. In contrast to many other Kashmiri Islamist ideologues he does not think that the ongoing struggle is an Islamic *jihad*. Rather, he says, it is basically 'political'. India, he tells me, is morally obliged to allow the Kashmiris the right to determine their political future. This, in fact, is a promise that India had made decades ago before the United Nations. He insists that India has never allowed genuine democracy to flourish in Kashmir, for fear that the people might vote for independence or in favour of Pakistan. Hence, all the regimes that have ruled Kashmir since 1947 have been Indian 'puppets', lacking the support of the Kashmiri Muslims. Had India not rigged the 1987 elections, he says, the Kashmiris might not have taken to the path of militancy. After all, he adds, many of the leading militants today were candidates in the elections. As for the role of the Jama'at in the militant movement, X is, surprisingly frank. 'It was the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front that started the movement', he claims. 'Later, the Jama'at launched its military wing, the Hizb ul-Mujahidin, which it did not officially declare as its own, both to counter Indian repression as well as to protect its workers from the JKLF'.

X hands me a copy of a magazine depicting decapitated heads and headless bodies. I don't know who these victims are. They could be Kashmiris killed by the armed forces or by militants. X points to the pictures and says, 'Both Pakistan and India want only the land of Kashmir, and neither is concerned about the plight of the Kashmiri people'. I ask him why he is critical of Pakistan as well. After all, I tell him, Sayyed 'Ali Gilani, an influential Jama'at ideologue, is a well-known advocate of the merger of Kashmir with Pakistan. Most people also believe the Jama'at to be pro-Pakistan as well.

X interrupts me and says, 'No, this isn't true. Gilani represents only one shade of opinion within the Jama'at. I, for one, do not agree with his demand to join Pakistan'.

I ask X what he feels about Pakistan. Does he, like the Jama'at sympathisers I have met on my various travels to Kashmir, believe that the fact that the majority of Kashmiris are Muslims actually demands



that Kashmir join Pakistan? I am ill prepared for what X has to say in reply and am completely taken aback by his response.

Pakistan, he tells me, claims to be an Islamic state, but, in reality, it is 'nothing of the sort'. 'They still follow British colonial laws, and so does India, so what is the difference?' he asks, a question to which I admit I have no answer. 'In fact', he emphatically declares, 'The Pakistani rulers are opposed to Islam, and he who claims that Pakistan is an Islamic state is the biggest liar'.

X looks at me as if he has pronounced a major revelation, and I pretend to be unfazed. 'The rulers of Pakistan lead corrupt, immoral lives, they womanise, just like Bill Clinton, guzzle alcohol and oppress the poor, and so if an Islamic state were ever established in Pakistan they know they would be killed under Islamic law. They talk of the Kashmiris' right to self-determination but they refuse to accept the Bihari Muslims stranded in Bangladesh'. 'If they were genuinely committed to Islam as they claim', he goes on, 'they would not have banned the Jama'at in Pakistan twice and nor would they be toeing the American line today'.

X's bitter opposition to the Pakistani state comes as a major surprise. I had expected him to simply repeat the views of Gilani, whom I had interviewed some years ago, and whose uncritical support for Pakistan I had assumed was unanimously shared by all Jama'at sympathisers and activists. Clearly, X has a mind of his own.

'India should allow the Kashmiris to travel to Pakistan', he says. 'The grass looks much greener on the other side of the fence. Once Kashmiris see Pakistan for themselves they would discover there's much less freedom there than here'. He tells me of a friend of his who recently visited Pakistan, and, on return, vowed never to repeat the experience. Another friend of his, he says, met some Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia while on the *haj* pilgrimage. They asked him, in all seriousness, why the Kashmiri Muslims had not killed all the non-Muslims living in Kashmir. Disgusted by the suggestion, his friend replied that Islam did not allow this, and told them that instead of preaching to him they should work to make Pakistanis better Muslims. The Pakistanis, apparently, took that as a major affront and accused him of being an Indian agent.

X tells me that this sort of (what he condemns as) 'anti-Islamic' attitude is characteristic of many radical Islamists in Pakistan. 'If I had to choose

between Pakistan and India', he reveals, 'I would rather be with India, because at least we don't have that type of suffocation here'.

But what about the recent virtual genocide of Muslims in Gujarat, I ask him. No action has been taken against the perpetrators of the crimes, I point out, and Narendra Modi still sits comfortably in his seat. Are Muslims any happier in India than in Pakistan, I ask.

'What happened in Gujarat was terrible that', he replies, 'but that does not mean that all or even most Hindus are communal or anti-Muslim. If that were the case, how could 100 million Muslims survive in a country dominated by 800 million or more Hindus? They would have cut us down like radish and carrots!'

As X speaks I think of Gilani, who writes in his jail memoirs, *Rudadi Qafs*, that it is almost as difficult for a Muslim to live in a Hindu society as it is for a fish to live in a desert. I mention this to X, who mulls over it and, then tells me that he totally disagrees. He points out that he himself lives in an almost entirely Hindu locality. The local Hindus know that he is associated with the Jama'at and that several of his own friends and relatives are or have been militants. 'No, I don't feel at all threatened by my Hindu neighbours', he confesses. He talks about a close Hindu friend, and this brings tears to his eyes. In between muffled sobs he tells me how many of the Hindus he knows and daily encounters, still respect Muslims, despite what has happened in Kashmir. 'If Muslims are travelling on a train and want to pray, the Hindu passengers make way for them', he says. 'Do you think they would allow this sort of freedom for public worship for non-Muslims if Kashmir is ruled by the likes of the Taliban?' he asks. I choose not to answer. In any case he has answered the question by simply asking it.

'We are tired of this endless bloodshed', X explains, as he quickly wipes his eyes. He reiterates the point that India is much to blame for refusing to recognise the right to self-determination of the Kashmiris, but trains his ire on the Pakistanis as well. 'The ISI', he says, referring to the dreaded Pakistani secret service organisation, 'is an anti-Islamic outfit. They simply use the name of Islam for their own purposes'. This is a rare admission from an avowed Islamist, and I ask him to elaborate. 'If I were to meet the Pakistani president', he goes on, 'I would tell him that it is the ISI that is ruling Pakistan, not the Pakistani government. The ISI is ruining Kashmir. It is making Kashmiris kill each other'.

Radical Islamists deny the legitimacy of nationalism altogether, claiming that it is a sinister ploy on the part of non-Muslim ‘enemies of Islam’ to divide the worldwide Muslim *ummah*. In Islamist discourse the nation-state is presented as yet another enticing idol that threatens to take the place of the one God. I ask X how he, as an Islamist, can support the cause of Kashmiri nationalism. I remind him of the writings of Sayyed Abul Ala Maududi, the founder and chief ideologue of the Jama‘at, who vehemently denounced nationalism as akin to idol worship. X agrees with the point, but says that Maududi actually opposed the creation of Pakistan. He does not, however, refer to Maududi’s migration to Pakistan and the emergence of the Pakistani Jama‘at as a vocal champion of what it regards as Pakistani national interests. ‘I am all for an independent and secular Kashmir, where all communities would enjoy equal rights’, X tells me. I don’t know if I should take him at his word. Perhaps he says this to convince me that he isn’t in the radical camp. After all, he knows that I am not a Muslim, and, like many people I’ve been interviewing in Jammu, probably suspects that I am a government agent, or, who knows, maybe even a Hindutva spy!

How, I ask X, does he reconcile his advocacy of a secular Kashmir with his commitment, as an Islamist, to an Islamic state. ‘An Islamic state cannot be imposed by force’, he answers. ‘It will only be established through peaceful persuasion and missionary activism. If, because of this, the majority of the Kashmiris desire to live in an Islamic state we have to respect their choice’. He recognises, however, that even if Kashmir were to become an Islamic state it would still have to deal with the issue of a large Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh minority. He claims that Islam has ‘the perfect solution’ to this issue. Religious minorities, he seeks to assure me, would be ‘treated well’ in the Islamic state, although he also adds that Islamic missionary groups would seek to propagate Islam among them, but using only peaceful means. ‘We should relate to non-Muslims through love’, he says, ‘not only because Islam tells us to, but also because this is the only way they would be willing to lend a receptive ear to the call of Islam’.

I am, of course, sceptical, and I make no pretence of concealing it. I make the rather obvious point that the Buddhists of Ladakh and the Hindus and Dalits of Jammu would probably never agree to live in a Muslim-dominated independent Kashmir. X brushes aside my argument and claims, ‘If Kashmir becomes a true Islamic state, following the

politics of the Prophet, there will be no problem at all for non-Muslim citizens’.

I do not wish to engage in that debate, knowing that our perspectives are completely at odds. Instead, I ask X whether an independent Kashmir would at all be a viable state. ‘No state can be a paradise’, he replies. He agrees that it would be difficult to convince both India and Pakistan to grant Kashmir independence, particularly since, as he claims, vested interests in the Pakistani and Indian army and secret services establishment are making a lucrative livelihood at the cost of the misery of the Kashmiris. However, he suggests that to get round the problem, Kashmir could be a condominium, internally independent but with its foreign affairs and defence jointly handled by India and Pakistan. That, he says, would be a preferable alternative to joining either India or Pakistan. ‘If Kashmir joins Pakistan the Kashmiris will soon repent. They will be exploited by the Punjabis, just like the Bengalis were or the Sindhis now are. The rulers of Pakistan have Islam only on their tongues, not in their hearts’, he asserts. ‘And the economic conditions in Pakistan are dismal, much worse than in India’. ‘On the other hand’, he quickly adds, ‘if they remain in India cross-border militancy will continue indefinitely, since it has now become an international phenomenon, quite out of the control of anybody’.

I am intrigued by X’s outspokenness. Perhaps the Jama‘at is not as monolithic as I thought it was and as it is commonly depicted in the media. I again ask X what he thinks of Gilani, who has consistently claimed that the militant movement in Kashmir is a religious war, between Islam and ‘infidelity’, and not simply a political struggle. ‘I totally disagree with Gilani on this’, X answers, to my obvious surprise. ‘This is not a *jihad*, but simply a political movement. Not everyone in the Jama‘at thinks it is a *jihad*. Gilani’s views are his own and do not represent the Jama‘at as such’. He explains Gilani’s position as a result of him being ‘under the influence of the ISI’. ‘If he retracts from that position’, he whispers, ‘he would probably be killed off by ISI agents, so he has to keep to that stance’. ‘Anyone who dares to openly question the Pakistani position can be murdered’, he tells me. He cites the recent killing of the moderate Kashmiri leader ‘Abdul Ghani Lone, who was killed, under the ISI’s instructions he claims. At the same time he also refers to what he calls ‘fake militants’, agents of the government of India, who have killed numerous people, as well as elements in the dreaded Lashkar-i Tayyeba who have also taken scores of innocent lives.

We talk about global developments, about the war in Iraq, the fighting in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden and America. I ask him why so much of the Muslim world is characterised by such instability. X replies that this has nothing to do with Islam as such. He blames what he calls 'enemies of Islam', particularly the American establishment and Israel, for most of the troubles that Muslims now face. Yet, he does not overlook the role of Islamic extremists, who, he says, misuse religion for their own narrow ends. He makes a distinction between a legitimate *jihad*, conducted in defence of life and religion, and illegitimate violence, undertaken for worldly goals and which involves the killing of innocent people. The latter sort of violence has no relation with 'real' Islam, he insists, but admits that this is what militancy in Kashmir has been reduced to, to a great extent. But misusing religion or promoting violence against innocent people in its name is not a Muslim monopoly, he reminds me. 'In India and Pakistan, America and Israel, indeed all over the world', he laments, 'all religions are being hijacked by extremists to promote irreligious goals. He who has no real religion becomes an extremist and uses religion to kill'.

Most Kashmiris, X tells me, are now plainly tired of the ongoing violence in the region that has taken a heavy toll of almost a hundred thousand lives. No longer do the militants have the same support they once enjoyed, he confesses, partly because of the infiltration of criminals parading in the guise of freedom fighters or Muslim *mujahids*. Besides, of course, militant attacks bring in their trail violent reprisals by the armed forces against innocent civilians. He singles out, in particular, the Lashkar-i Tayyeba for censure. 'Many Lashkar men have nothing at all to do with Islam. Often, they are sent to Kashmir to fight as a punishment for not being considered Islamic enough'.

Another sign that the Kashmiris are increasingly tired of the violence, X tells me, is the conversion of several Kashmiri Muslims to Christianity in recent years. Newspaper reports put the figure at ten thousand. No one knows what the numbers actually are, but X admits that they are considerable. 'These conversions are a direct result of militancy', he says. 'I want to tell the likes of Gilani', he says, 'that they are driving Kashmir to perdition, causing thousands to abandon Islam'. Militancy, he explains, has led to an almost total collapse of the missionary work of groups like the Jama'at, leaving many poor Muslims vulnerable to the appeals and blandishments of foreign-funded Christian missionaries. In the ongoing violence numerous Jama'at activists have

been killed, and the missionary network of the Jama'at is now almost totally defunct.

'Islam tells us that our principal duty is, not to capture political power, but, rather, to convey the message of Islam to others', he stresses, quoting the Qur'an to back his case. However, he says, the various militant groups are unconcerned about this principal Islamic duty. In fact, he asserts, they are actually working to defeat the cause, 'axing their own feet', as he puts it. 'They've created such hatred in the minds of the Hindus about Islam that non-Muslims will probably never be willing to accept it', he laments. He tells me the story of a friend of his who took a Hindu acquaintance along with him to meet the local commander of the Harkat ul-Ansar, a dreaded Deobandi-related militant group. The Hindu greeted the commander and shook his hand. Shortly after, the commander found out that he was a Hindu. 'All hell broke loose', X says, 'The commander shouted out a curse and then wiped his hands on the ground to cleanse himself, saying that he had been polluted by the touch of a Hindu'. 'How', X heaves a heavy sigh and says, 'can such bigoted people ever invite others to Islam?' 'These people are enemies of Islam while claiming to be its greatest champions'.

X is obviously a complex character. I don't know what to make of him, or whether to take all that he says at face value. He seems honest enough, but I force myself to remain somewhat sceptical. The conversation is absorbing: I've never met an Islamist so self-critical of Islamism as it is practised. I wish I could stay longer but it is getting late and so I ask him for permission to leave. He tells me to finish my tea, which is now cold and insipid, while he mutters a prayer in Arabic. I ask him what he has said, and he tells me that he has prayed to God for my benefit in this world and in the next.

I get up to leave, but X tells me to sit. He points to a poster on the wall and asks me if I know what it means. The poster depicts a map of India, with Kashmir as part of it. At the top of the map is an open book, above which is an Arabic phrase, which reads 'There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah'. This is the Islamic creed of confession of the faith. On either side of the map is an unsheathed sword. I pretend not to understand what the poster is all about and ask X to explain.

‘The book on top of the map is the Holy Qur’an’, he says gravely. ‘Make that the Constitution of India and all your problems will be solved. And then even Kashmir will willingly agree to be part of India’.

What of the two swords, I ask X. Are they to be used to forcibly impose the Qur’an as India’s Constitution?

‘No, no, brother’, X hastens to reply. ‘They are just there to protect the Constitution from any mischief-doers’.

‘My brother’, X tells me as he takes my hand in his, ‘all this writing and research of yours is useless if you do not recognise and act on the Truth’. Needless to say, the Truth, as X imagines it, is Islam as presented by the Jama‘at. ‘Yes,’ he tells me, ‘that is the only way to personal and collective salvation’. ‘If India were to become an Islamic state’, he exclaims somewhat excitedly as he probably imagines the prospect, ‘all our problems, even the issue of Kashmir, would automatically be solved’.

‘The Jama‘at is dedicated to that noble mission’, he says as he guides me to the door. ‘There is no organisation, Hindu and Muslim, more genuinely concerned and committed to the welfare of India than the Jama‘at’, he announces, firmly gripping my hand.

He looks into my eyes, and I realise that he knows I am unconvinced.



As these diverse voices so strikingly suggest, Islam, like any other religion, can be understood and interpreted in a variety of ways, often mutually opposed. They point to the obvious, although often overlooked, fact of the fractured and fiercely contested nature of Islamic discourse. The notion of there being a singular, monolithic understanding of Islam, so deeply cherished by radical Islamists and their opponents alike, is, therefore, obviously misleading. The Muslim monolith is a mythical creation. Different Muslim groups offer different understandings of normative Islam, which, in turn, can go along with different political agendas, which are sought to be legitimised as ‘Islamic’. This diversity of opinion offers room for promoting alternate ways of imagining inter-community relations in ‘Islamic’ terms.

The voices highlighted here point to the theological resources contained within a broadly defined ‘Islamic’ paradigm that can be used to critique

the exclusivist and hostile notions of the non-Muslim ‘other’ that are so deeply ingrained in Islamist discourse, and which are routinely employed by those who see themselves engaged in what they describe as a *jihad* in Kashmir. Even the belief, held by many people highlighted here, that Islam represents the absolute truth, can be used to counter the arguments of the radical Islamists. Thus, for instance, the stress on the need for peaceful missionary work, and the belief that violence in the name of *jihad* would gravely hamper the prospects for *tabligh*, only further alienating Hindus from Islam, functions a powerful critique of what the radical Islamists consider as a *jihad*.

These alternate voices that, in their own ways, critique both the radical Islamists as well as rightwing Hindu groups, cry out to be heard. They can serve as crucial resources in countering the appeals of both Islamist as well as Hindutva extremists and in developing alternate ways of conceiving of inter-community relations in Jammu and Kashmir. In turn, highlighting and promoting such voices could, in a limited way, help promote efforts to bring about a just and peaceful solution to the Kashmir conflict.



### ***Hindu and Dalit Perspectives on Religion and Inter-Community Relations***

T, Kashmiri Pandit, was born and brought up in Anantnag in southern Kashmir, but now lives in Jammu, where she works as a school teacher. Like almost other members of her community, she fled the Kashmir Valley soon after the outbreak of militancy, fearing for her life. She is a devout Shaivite, but at the same time she holds the Sufis of Kashmir in high regard. A picture of the shrine of Nuruddin Nurani, chief figure in the Kashmiri Rishi order, adorns her prayer room, placed adjacent to an image of the *linga* in the cave of Amarnath, a renowned Hindu pilgrimage centre in Kashmir.

T is a regular contributor to local magazines and newspapers and writes mainly on issues related to Kashmiri culture, religion and history. She believes that the Rishis were beyond conventional differences of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’, and insists that true men or women of God do not subscribe to any religion or identify with any particular community. People who have ‘reached’ God, she says, ‘liberate themselves from



such restrictions'. In her opinion the Kashmiri Rishis have been wrongly presented as Muslims in the conventional sense of the term in order to co-opt what she sees as the radical challenge posed by the Rishis to the '*ulama* and defenders of the Islamic establishment. 'Just as Nanak or Dadu or Kabir cannot be said to have been Hindus in the narrow sense of the term, despite what many Hindus would today insist, so too, Nuruddin Nurani was not a Muslim in the commonly accepted sense of the word, contrary to what many people claim', she argues.

The Rishis preached an ethical monotheism that transcended narrowly inscribed communal boundaries, T says, and Kashmiri Rishism, if understood correctly and sincerely followed, can help the process of bridging the divide between Muslims and Hindus. The ecumenical appeal of Rishism that goes beyond communal concerns is reflected, she tells me, in the very genesis of the movement launched by Nuruddin Nurani, whom she describes as 'Sahajananad' or the 'Beautiful One' and as Shaikh ul-'Alam, the 'Spiritual Preceptor of the World'. Lal Ded or Lalleshwari, Nuruddin Nurani's first teacher, T explains, was a Kashmiri Pandit woman, whose actual religious identity is disputed, but who is looked upon with great respect by Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims alike. She is believed to have exercised a seminal influence on Nuruddin Nurani's spiritual development.

Lal Ded's life, T says, is shrouded in mystery and legend, the first references to her being made in Muslim chronicles many years after her death. It is believed that she was born in the village of Sampora, near Srinagar, in 1335 in a Kashmiri Pandit family. As per the prevalent custom, she was married off at a very young age to a Brahmin temple priest from the village of Padmanpora, the present-day township of Pampore. Her mother-in-law is said to have cruelly mistreated her, and her husband, jealous of her spiritual attainments and her growing popularity among the people, forced her out of his house. She then took to the jungles, roaming about completely naked, performing stern austerities and meditational practices. Local lore has it that she came to be deeply influenced by several Sufi saints who had settled down in Kashmir to preach Islam. Some Muslim scholars claim that she converted to Islam as a result of this, while Pandit scholars vehemently disagree, and claim, instead, that she remained a Shaivite, although a rebel, all her life. 'Who knows?' T asks with a smile. 'It really doesn't matter to me what she was, because I find her message appealing all the same'.

T tells me the fascinating story of Lal Ded's first meeting with Nuruddin Nurani, whom she describes as his 'first teacher'. Local tradition has it that Lal Ded was instructed by a certain Sufi, Mir Sayyed Hussain Simnani, to go to the village of Kaimuh to be with Sadra Mauj, Nuruddin Nurani's mother, while she was pregnant so that she could take care of her. Nuruddin Nurani, the story goes, refused to drink his mother's milk for the first three days after his birth. Lal Ded, who was present then, lovingly scolded him for this, saying, 'Oh Nuruddin! You were not ashamed to come into this world, then why are you ashamed to drink your mother's milk?' Hearing this, the child put his lips on Lal Ded's breast and drank her milk. According to another story, she said to the child, 'Oh Nuruddin! Drink milk, for without drinking the Gnostic wisdom there is no joy! Have you forgotten that when the Prophet Abraham was building the Ka'aba in Mecca, you helped him and I would bring mud loaded on my head?' After this, Nuruddin Nurani relented and drank her milk. Lal Ded's milk was, for Nuruddin Nurani, a spiritual treasure, through which, T says, the child 'opened his spiritual eyes and received the wealth of Gnostic knowledge'.

Nuruddin Nurani, T goes on, was twenty-two when, in 1400, Lal Ded breathed her last, having spent much of his youth in her company. In such great reverence did he hold her that in one of his mystical verses he says:

That Lalla of Padmanpore  
Who had drunk to her full the nectar  
She was an avatar of ours  
Oh God , grant me the same spiritual power.

T recites another of Nuruddin Nurani's verses to stress his close relationship with Lal Ded and the point about the breath of his vision that transcended conventional communal differences:

Lalla drank fully at the fountain of immortality  
She has witnessed the omnipotent glory of Shiva  
Hence, we treasure utmost adoration for her in the innermost  
recesses of our hearts  
She carved for herself that seraphic stature of an incarnation  
O Divine Transcendence, grant that very boon to me.

Lal Ded, T says, bitterly critiqued social inequalities, meaningless superstitions and rituals and challenged the oppression of the Brahmins.

These themes are strongly reflected in Nuruddin Nurani's poetry as well, a result of Lal Ded's influence, at least in part. Indeed, so closely related are their thoughts that one can easily mistake her poetry for his, and in many medieval chronicles they appear together, randomly mixed up. Although Lal Ded employed Shaivite concepts in her poetry while Nuruddin's verses are replete with Sufistic terms, 'as regards austerities, mediation and the love of God', T stresses, they both shared the same goal. Their path was the same, and this is why both the Hindus as well as Muslims of Kashmir hold them in high esteem. T recites a verse attributed to Lal Ded to illustrate the argument:

Shiva is All-Pervading

Do not differentiate between a Hindu and a Muslim

If you have understanding, then realise your own self

In truth, this is the means to realise God.

As intriguing as the story of her life is the account of her death, a pointed reminder of the cause of inter-communal harmony that was so dear to her. Lal Ded, T says, died just outside the Jami'a mosque at the town of Bijbehara. Her body was not to be found, and in its place her followers discovered a pile of flowers. Her Hindu disciples consigned them to the flames, while her Muslim followers buried them, each in accordance with their own religious customs.



Every Thursday evening crowds mill around the *dargah* of Baba Jeevan Shah in the heart of Jammu. From their dress, most visitors seem to be Hindus, the vast majority being women. Many of them look middle-class and probably 'upper' caste as well, although some seem from more humble families. Pilgrims stream into the shrine, which is draped with a green cloth and surrounded by a marble screen. In the courtyard, young men distribute sweetened puffed rice, while a group of Hindu and Muslim women sit around and chat. In a small room that opens out into the courtyard Aslam Sahib, the custodian, sits on a mattress, surrounded by a crowd of women and a few young men. They approach him in turn, explain to him their requests or problems, and he responds with a prayer and instruction.

P is a regular visitor to the shrine. She is a Punjabi Hindu, and her family migrated to Jammu from Lahore in the wake of the Partition. She teaches at a government school and is also involved in a local

Gandhian welfare organisation. She heard about the shrine from her aunt, and after visiting it for the first time felt solace and comfort which drew her back to it. She visits temples as well, and argues that for her God is not restricted to only one sort of place of worship. 'He is everywhere, even inside your own heart, so you don't need to go to a temple or shrine or mosque to find Him', she explains, although she continues to visit the shrine because she experiences a deep sense of peace there.

P believes that the Sufi saints incarnations (*avatar*) of God. She sees Baba Jiwan Shah as a powerful, yet loving, being. But more than providing access to a source of power, the *dargah* also affords her a release from the tensions of the day-to-day world. When she feels depressed, she says, she visits the *dargah*, where she pours out her woes to the buried saint. There she also seeks the advice of Aslam, the custodian, whom she regards as an 'uncle'. Aslam speaks to her as a friend, and there is nothing specifically 'Islamic' in the advice that he provides her. 'He tells me to be good, to refrain from bad things, to lead a pure life. He never seeks to impose his religion or to denigrate other religions', she says.

P identifies herself as a Hindu, but is critical of Hindu groups that preach hatred for other communities. 'There is no difference between the RSS and the Jama'at-i Islami', she says. 'Both preach hatred and intolerance'. As she sees it, one need not restrict oneself exclusively to the religion one is born in. 'There's no harm at all in taking good things from other religions as well', she explains. And for this, she says, *dargahs* provide the ideal platform. It is only in *dargahs*, she points out, that people of different communities gather together to worship. She refers to the practice of 'high' caste Hindus, Dalits and Muslims eating together in the *langar* or the *dargah's* community kitchen. 'It's such a wonderful feeling – us worshipping together in the shrine', she says, contrasting this with the deeply held negative stereotypes that many Hindus and Muslims share of each other.

It was at the *dargah* that P met numerous Muslim women, some of who are now, she says, her 'best friends, just like sisters'. She stresses that it is was only through meeting and befriending them that she was able to counter her own prejudices about Muslims and to realise that 'except in some ritual matters, there is little difference between us'. She realises that Islamic and Hindu 'fanaticism', as she puts it, serve to

‘create barriers of communication’, added to which is the ‘upper’ caste Hindu ‘disdain’ for Muslims as ‘inferior’, ‘polluting’, ‘dirty’ and ‘violent’, expressed, for instance, in the refusal of many members of her family to eat food cooked by Muslims or to allow Muslims to enter their kitchens. She tells me how the refusal of many of her fellow ‘upper’ caste Hindus to ‘see Muslims as ordinary human beings, just like everyone else’ makes the problem of Hindu-Muslim relations ‘more complicated’. ‘Frankly’, she confesses, ‘I am sick of conventional religion because of the hatred and violence that has been justified in its name, and I realise that I cannot find the truth there’.

Her husband, P tells me, is a staunch BJP supporter. In his younger days he also used to attend the RSS *shakha*. They keep squabbling, she says, about politics. Yet, she says, whenever he comes to pick her up from the *dargah* he also goes inside to pay his respects to Baba Jeewan Shah. ‘True men of God have no religion or caste’, she opines as I try to figure out her husband’s rather inexplicable behaviour.



Dalits account for almost a fourth of the population of Jammu province, but in discussions about the Kashmir question the Dalit voice is almost completely absent. Typically, the Hindus of the state are treated as a homogenous whole, although sometimes a distinction is made between the Pandits of the Valley and the Dogras of Jammu. It is, however, crucial to bring in the Dalit perspective when examining inter-community relations in Jammu and Kashmir, not only because of the numerical importance of the Dalits but also because they are among the most marginalised communities in the state.

There are 13 officially recognised Scheduled Castes in Jammu and Kashmir: 1) Barwala, 2) Basit, 3) Batwal, 4) Chura, 5) Chamar/Ramdasia, 6) Dhyar, 7) Doom/Mahasha, 8) Gardi, 9) Julaha, 10) Megh/Kabirpanthi, 11) Ratal, 12) Saryara and 13) Watal. The state’s Dalit population is almost entirely concentrated in the Jammu province, with only a few Dalits, belonging to the Ratal and Watal castes, living in the Kashmir Valley. In addition to the Dalits who are counted, for official purposes, as ‘Hindus’ are the numerous Dalit groups who have converted to Sikhism, Christianity and Islam over the centuries. According to T.R. Azad, a leading Ambedkarite activist from Jammu, historically the Dalits of the state, as elsewhere in India, converted in large numbers to various religions in search of liberation from the caste

system and the Brahminical religion that provides it religious sanction. Many Dalits who are today counted in government records as ‘Hindus’ follow sectarian traditions that are markedly egalitarian and anti-Brahminical, such as the Ravidasi *panth* and the Kabir *panth*. These traditions, in theory, obviate the need for the Brahmin priest as an intermediary and also stress the equality of all human beings. In the case of the Kabir *panth*, inter-communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims is also given particular stress. Rituals, while not denied, are seen as ultimately of little value, with the focus instead being placed on individual morality and devotion to the one formless God.

Despite their large population, the Dalits of the state are not well-organised. The Ambedkarite movement, which is strong in various other parts of India, does not have a major presence in Jammu and Kashmir. There are only two Ambedkarite organisations in Jammu—the Dr. Ambedkar Education Foundation and the Dalit Sahitya Academy. ‘Don’t get taken in by these fancy titles’, a Dalit activist warned me. ‘They are just letterhead organisations, and their work is limited simply to celebrating Ambedkar’s birthday, protesting against victimisation of Dalit government employees from time to time and garnering Dalit votes during elections’.

One reason for the weakness of the Dalit movement in Jammu, I was told by many Ambedkarites I met, is that the vast majority of the Dalits here continue to identify themselves as ‘Hindus’. A number of Hindu religious organisations are active in the area, working also among the Dalits, while, unlike in several other parts of India, Ambedkarite Buddhist groups have only a marginal presence here. Although some 2000 Dalits of the Batwal caste are said to have converted to Buddhism in recent years, they are said to be Buddhist only in name and to retain most of their Hindu beliefs and practices. Because the Dalit movement is still weak in the region, the 8 per cent quota for Dalits in government services remains unfilled, and many Dalit leaders are said to be associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is generally seen as an anti-Dalit party.

Under Shaikh Abdullah, Jammu and Kashmir was the first state in India to implement radical land reforms, as a result of which a large number of landless Dalit labourers received plots of land of their own. The economic conditions of the Dalits have thereby improved, and although the majority of the Dalits continue to work as labourers, artisans and petty shopkeepers, there is a small Dalit middle class,

consisting almost entirely of government servants, who form the backbone of the fledgling Ambedkarite movement in the state. The slight improvement in the Dalits' economic conditions notwithstanding, caste discrimination continues to be rampant, especially in the villages in the hilly regions of Jammu, Kathua and Udhampur. I was told stories of Dalits being forced to leave their villages by Rajput landlords for daring to take out a marriage procession in the streets, of Dalits being refused houses on rent, of Dalit students suffering the taunts of 'upper' caste students and so on. R.L. Jangral, one of the most senior Dalit officers in the Kashmir Administrative Services, related to me how, when he was a lecturer in a college in Jammu, a Brahmin landlord refused to rent him his house simply because of his caste. 'Such things are still widespread', he says. 'In many villages', he tells me, 'even senior Dalit government servants cannot enter 'upper' caste houses'.

'Hindu Rashtra has no place for Dalits, except for at the bottom of the heap', insists Nathu Ram, a young Dalit school teacher whom I met at the office Dr. Ambedkar Education Foundation, one of the only two Dalit organisations in Jammu. 'Hinduism or Hindutva or call it what you will is simply a means to preserve and promote Aryan hegemony', he forcefully argues. He hands me a leaflet issued by the Nagpur-based Babasaheb Ambedkar National Intellectual Forum protesting the demand by the Shankaracharya of the Karvir Peeth that the Indian Constitution be scrapped and replaced with the *Manusmriti*, the Bible of Brahminism. 'This', he tells me, 'is what the RSS plan is all about. They want to keep us in perpetual slavery, faithfully following in the path of Manu'. Yet, he concedes that many Dalits are ardent supporters of the BJP. 'They crave to be known as super-Hindus in order that the 'upper' castes accept them', he explains.

At the same time as he bitterly denounces the BJP and Hindu supremacist groups, Nathu Ram comes down heavily on Islamist militants in Kashmir. He fears that if the state were to join Pakistan the plight of the Dalits would only be further exacerbated. 'Groups like the Lashkar see all non-Muslims, no matter what their caste or class, as, by definition, enemies of God. So, how could we ever agree to live under them?' he asks. However, he claims that relations between Dalits and Muslims in Jammu are fairly cordial, and says that while many 'upper' caste Hindus treat Dalits as untouchables, the Muslims, in general, do not. In Muslim-dominated parts of Jammu province, such as Doda, Rajouri and Poonch, he says, Dalits do not suffer the stigma

of untouchability. 'This is both because of the Muslim influence and also because the 'upper' castes feel that if they openly discriminate against us we will join hands with the Muslims', he explains.

A meeting of Dalit activists is under way at the Dr. Ambedkar Education Foundation when I arrive. They are discussing a range of issues, from politics and Buddhist culture to the problems of women and Dalits living in areas of the state affected by militancy. All the activists present on the occasion are in government service, a reminder that Dalits still cannot hope to rise up in the 'upper' caste-controlled private sector. Even as relatively privileged members of their society many of them continue to face caste discrimination. Few of them have any 'high' caste Hindu friends, although some have good Muslim and Christian acquaintances. A consensus seems to prevail at the meeting that religious conversion is the only way out for the Dalits, for they can, they believe, never find equality and acceptance in Hinduism.

'In Hinduism there is no concept of a human being plain and simple. You are always identified as a member of one caste or the other, and the 'upper' castes call us as Hindus only to inflate Hindu numbers', says a Dalit youth who teaches in a village school.

Most of the men in the room feel that the solution lies in conversion to Buddhism, and some say that they plan to take the step in the near future. Yet, they also agree that many Dalits who have not been influenced by the Ambedkarite movement would not follow them. 'They think they can shed their low caste identity by joining a Hindu sect and claiming to be Rajput or Brahmin, but this does not work in the long run', one of the men insists. Many educated Dalits, he tells me, desperately seek to conceal their Dalit identity. 'If this continues', he argues, 'how can we, the privileged Dalits, ever work for the cause of our less fortunate fellow Dalits?' For that to happen, he says, Dalits stress, rather than conceal, their Dalit identity, to 'take pride in being Dalit, like the Afro-Americans take pride in being black'.

Besides considering the Buddhist option, the activists present talk about the need for what they refer to as 'de-Brahminising' their own religious traditions. 'Our traditions contain a strong strain of protest against Brahminical oppression, but over the years they have been so diluted that they are now hardly distinguishable from Brahminical Hinduism. In this way, the Brahminical establishment has sought to perpetuate our slavery', points out Lokesh, a railway employee. 'We have to revive



them, to turn them into weapons for protest and social transformation, because ours is a very religious society. People will throng in their thousands for a *satsang* but if you call them for a Dalit meeting, hardly a dozen will turn up', he says.

N. Kumar, a school teacher from the Megh or Bhagat caste of hereditary weavers, also known as Kabirpanthis, points out that while the Meghs claim to be followers of Kabir, who was also from the weaver caste, and have several Kabir temples in Jammu, in actual fact they continue to worship the deities of the Brahminical pantheon and employ Brahmins to officiate over their religious functions. 'This is a complete travesty of Kabir's message', he admits. The Brahminisation of the Kabirpanth tradition has gone so far, he claims, that the Meghs now consider themselves superior to the Chamars and generally refuse to eat food cooked by them. He alludes to the role of the Arya Samaj in this regard, and claims that Arya Samaji missionaries have been actively engaged in promoting divisions between the Meghs and the other Dalits. 'They propounded and propagated the myth that the Meghs were originally Brahmins and hence superior to the Chamars, but because they inter-dined with the Dalits they, too, were condemned to becoming Dalits. In order to co-opt the Meghs into the Hindu fold they went about providing them with Brahminical threads to Megh men', he tells me.

The Chamar activists, too, speak about how the Ravidas tradition has been so thoroughly Brahminised that it now bears little resemblance to Ravidas' original teachings. Although there are several Ravidas temples in the Jammu province, almost none of them, I am told, is engaged in any sort of social work. 'They've all become like Hindu temples, where people go to pray and expect that Ravidas will grant them their wishes. The priests in these temples have become like Brahmins, making a livelihood out of the faith of the credulous', laments Ramesh, a Chamar working in a government department in Udhampur. 'Ravidas was a great social revolutionary', he argues, 'but his radical spirit, his message of working for the oppressed, has been completely ignored or else spiritualised today, and now many people in the Ravidas Sabha seem to be pro-RSS, although Hindutva stands for the oppression of the Dalits'. He quotes a verse from Ravidas to make his point of Ravidas having been a 'great revolutionary':

Aisa chandu raj mai mile saban ko ann  
*Chhot bado sab ram base ravidas rahe prasann*

May such a kingdom come where everyone gets enough to eat  
God resides in every man, small or big, and Ravidas is happy.

Critiquing the Brahminisation of their religious traditions also means retrieving what the Dalit activists see as their authentic histories, fashioning historical memory into a tool for social protest. Thus, Ravidas, so the 'Brahminised' version of the story has it, died after he was refused entry into a temple in Chittor by the Brahmins. In order to 'prove' that he was a 'Brahmin', he tore open his heart, revealed three 'holy' threads inside his body, and then died. 'This is complete humbug, a myth propagated by the Brahmins in order to claim Ravidas as one of their own'. Ramesh tells me. 'In this way they want to argue that Dalits just cannot produce such a great thinker as Ravidas. It is also a way to dilute the powerful challenge to Brahminism that Ravidas posed'. In actual fact, Ramesh argues, Ravidas was probably killed by irate Brahmins, incensed at his crusade against Brahminical hegemony. 'We in the Ambedkar Educational Foundation want to recover and highlight these facts, in order to remind the Dalits of their true history, of the struggles and achievements of their forefathers', he says.

The same recovery of history is underway among some Kabirpanthi Meghs, who as a Megh activist says, stoutly rebut the theory that Kabir was born in a Brahmin family. 'We must rewrite our traditions from the Dalit perspective, for if we lack our own histories, we will never be able to speak for ourselves', he asserts.

As the radical Kabir and the iconoclastic Ravidas have been 'spiritualised' beyond recognition, they have been turned into caste deities, functioning to symbolise caste divisions rather than inspiring their followers to overcome these differences. 'Both Kabir and Ravidas', says this Megh activist, 'spoke on behalf of all the oppressed, but today Ravidas has become a Chamar god and Kabir a Megh hero'. As a result, few, if any, Chamars visit Kabir temples and hardly any Meghs worship in temples dedicated to Ravidas. 'We in the Ambedkar Educational Foundation', he explains, 'try and encourage Chamars and Meghs to visit each others' places of worship. That is precisely what Ravidas and Kabir would have wanted, and, besides, this sends out a powerful message to our people that we must work together'.

Just as getting the Dalits to agree on conversion seems an uphill task, so too is the process of broadening the Dalit movement to include all the Dalit castes, the men concede. The Dalits of Jammu, as elsewhere,

are not a homogenous category, being divided into more than a dozen castes. Internalising the logic of the Brahminical system, some of these castes claim to be superior to those considered to be below them in the caste hierarchy. This has made it immensely difficult for the different castes to work together, and has left the Dalit organisations in Jammu vulnerable to the charge of being a monopoly of the Chamars, among the most numerous of the Dalit castes in the state. Yet, the men insist that the Dalits must work together for without unity they would be bound to go unheard. 'If the Dalit view is not heard when discussions are now on regarding the future of Jammu and Kashmir we will be the biggest losers', they stress. It is imperative, they argue, that their interests, which they identify as distinct from those of the 'upper' caste Hindus, be taken into account when discussing the political future of the state. For this they underline the need for Dalits to have a separate political voice of their own, pointing out that all the established parties in the state are either dominated by Kashmiri Muslims or by 'upper' caste Hindus from Jammu, and hence cannot be expected to champion Dalit concerns. As one young activist puts it bluntly, 'We've tried the Muslims and we've tried the Hindus, but they've done nothing for us. So we must speak for ourselves to get our voices heard'.



Christians in Jammu: Between Survival, Dialogue and Mission  
Christians form a small minority in Jammu and Kashmir, and most of them live in the Jammu province. Of these some 11,000 are said to be Catholics and a similar number belong to various Protestant denominations. In Jammu town most Christians live in the Christian Mohalla, also called Prem Nagar, in what was once the outskirts of the town but is now at its very heart. With some 600 houses, the Mohalla is said to be the single largest Christian colony in all of north India. Almost all local Christians are of Valmiki/Bhangi or sweeper caste background, although many Christians do not wish to recognise this, seeking to pass off as 'upper' caste by using various Hindu or Muslim surnames. They have been joined by a sizeable number of Bhangis from Punjab, some of whom were Christians before and others who converted after shifting to Jammu. Because most Christians in Jammu are of Bhangi background, Christianity is generally seen by others as a 'low' caste religion. Many Christians continue to work as sweepers, although a small number have taken to other occupations, including lower level government service as well as trade.

The Christian community in Jammu is divided between the Catholics and various Protestant denominations. Some of the latter are foreign-funded groups that are aggressively mission minded. Posters pasted on the walls of houses in the Christian Mohalla announce 'Revival Meetings' and 'Gospel Crusades', promising miraculous healings by a host of charismatic preachers. The most active group in missionary work are the Pentecostals, who have a number of 'prayer houses' in the Mohalla. According to Father Justin, a priest attached to the St. Mary's Garrison Catholic Church, Jammu, the Mohalla has over a hundred Pentecostal pastors, many of whom run their own churches, several of which he dismisses, rather uncharitably, as little more than 'shops' that have been set up with the purpose of garnering foreign funds.

The Bethel Church in the Mohalla is a major centre for evangelical Pentecostal missionary work. Pastor Shaukat Peter, the head of the Church, has recently retired from government service. Like most other Pentecostal preachers, and unlike, for instance, Catholic priests, he has not undergone a long period of training in a seminary. Instead, he learnt about his faith by attending a few classes at a Bible school. He is clear as to what he believes Christianity stands for and what his mission in life is. 'The Bible says that you can be saved only through faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Messiah', he insists.

Does that mean that I, who do not believe in this claim, would be destined for hell, I ask him. 'Well, that is what the Bible says', he replies as he looks me in the eye. He hastens to add, however, that 'Jesus tells us to love everybody, irrespective of religion'. 'Jesus loves you too', he says gently, seeking to comfort me. 'God loved humankind so much that He sent us His only son, Jesus Christ, so that we may have eternal life through him'.

'If Jesus truly loves me so much', I ask, 'why would he send me to hell simply because I refuse to believe that he is the son of God?' Peter conveniently skirts the question, but insists that the primary task of the Christian faithful is to announce what he calls the 'Good News of Jesus Christ'. He and his fellow Pentecostals take this missionary task with considerable seriousness. He tells me of a mass 'revival and healing' rally that they organised a few years ago in Jammu. 'Many people were miraculously cured of their illnesses as a result', he claims.

Peter tells me about the Bethel Mission School that his church runs in Jammu. It has classes till the fourth grade, and most of its students are Hindus. Besides that, he admits, the church is not engaged in any sort of social work. Its primary focus is on preaching, representing a conservative theology that is characteristic of the Pentecostal fundamentalist tradition. This is reflected in Peter's own approach to inter-community relations. He admits the need for better relations, and says that this can only come about through love. But then he hurriedly qualifies that statement by adding with an air of finality, 'It is only through accepting Jesus and the love that he offers that our problems can finally be solved'.



Alex runs a small provision store in the Christian Mohalla, which also stocks Christian literature produced by a Pentecostal publishing house. As I stop by to glance through the books on display he hands me a leaflet in Hindi that tells the story of what it describes as the 'journey to Jesus' of an Indian convert. He is active as a lay Christian in organising what he calls 'revivals', meetings to promote Christian awareness in the locality. He is a member of the church choir, and tells me about the singing competitions that he helps organise among youth, including Muslims and Hindus, which provide occasions to 'spread the Gospel'. He also travels to outlying villages to screen the 'Jesus film', a movie purportedly based on the life of Jesus, which is today a popular means for missionary communication. The film, he informs me, has been translated into hundreds of languages, including even Dogri, Punjabi and Kashmiri, the principal languages spoken in the Jammu region.

Like many other local Christians of his generation, Alex is fairly educated. 'It is all because of the Christian schools', he says. He contrasts the conditions of his fellow Christians with that of the Hindu Bhangis or Valmikis and the Musallis, Muslim sweepers. 'We are far better off than them', he claims. Christianity, it appears, has provided his people with a sense of pride and a positive identity, besides concrete benefits such as education. Yet, Alex complains that Christian schools cater essentially to caste Hindus, particularly the rich and the middle class. With their high fees the elitist Christian schools in Jammu are out of bounds for most local Christians. At the same time, the state, he says, does not provide the Christians the same benefits of reservation

as it does to Hindu Dalits. 'This makes a mockery of our claim to be secular', he complains. He also tells me of how many caste Hindus continue to treat the Christians as 'Untouchables' especially in the villages. In large parts of Jammu province, he says, Christians are as poor as the other Dalits and the Church has done little to help them. He suggests that the Christians, too, be included in the Scheduled Caste list, but is wary that the other Dalits may not agree as they might see this as threatening to reduce their own representation in government services. He is not aware of any effort on the part of the local Christians to dialogue with the other Dalits in this regard. The problem, he admits, is exacerbated by the fact that many Christians want to hide their Dalit past, and hence are reluctant to join hands with the other Dalits.

As a relatively recently converted community, the Christians of Jammu, Alex tells me, are not, as a whole, known for being 'strict' Christians. Marriages occur regularly across denominational lines, between Pentecostals, Protestants and Catholics. Some Kashmiri Muslims living in the Mohalla have married Christian girls. The spouses continue to follow their own religious traditions, and their children are not baptised. Alex claimed that they pray in both the church and the mosque. Marriages with Hindu Valmiki also occur, and these generally result in the Valmiki spouse converting to Christianity. Traces of the pre-Christian religious traditions are still evident in the community, a fact that Alex greatly laments. Several Christians pray to Hindu deities and worship at Sufi shrines. Many Christians, particularly of the older generation, have 'Muslim'-sounding names. I remark about this to Alex, and he tells me, 'In the past most people read Urdu, especially the Urdu translation of the Bible, and so they adopted such names'. Today, he says, the trend is changing. Many Christians keep 'Hindu' first names or else 'English' names, which they get from the 'English Bible' that has now replaced its Urdu counterpart.

Relations between Christians and other communities in Jammu are fairly cordial, Alex says, although there are numerous irritants. Most Muslims do not treat the Christians as 'Untouchables', but many caste Hindus still do. However, relations between Christians and Muslims have been strained somewhat after reports of missionaries converting a number of Muslims in Kashmir. Alex admits that some conversions might have taken place, but defends this on the grounds that all communities are free to propagate their faith. At the same time as he stresses his commitment to mission, he also talks of the need to promote

inter-communal harmony. He tells me that his Muslim neighbour invites him to his house on Eid and he reciprocates at Christmas. He says that his group of lay Christians organises plays stressing communal harmony on Christmas, and says that similar activities are sometimes held in some Christian schools in Jammu.



‘Faith Home’, as it calls itself, is a Pentecostal organisation in the Christian Mohalla. Like the Bethel Church, it sees as its principal task the spread of its own version of Christianity. It has its global headquarters in Chennai, its resident Padri tells me. It is different from other Pentecostal groups in some significant respects. Thus, its priests do not marry and they live off local donations. They are supposed to lead a strict and simple life, to dress in white and to refrain from alcohol. The theology of this Pentecostal group is decidedly conservative, concerned with individual, as distinct from social, salvation. Not surprisingly, its work in Jammu is limited only to preaching, and it does not run any schools or other such institutions.

All the woes of the world, the Padri tells me, can be overcome simply by accepting Jesus as one’s ‘personal saviour’ and leading a ‘true’ Christian life. Short of that, all other means are futile. Preaching the Gospel, and not dialogue, then, is the Padri’s answer to all the conflicts in the world, including in Kashmir. Not surprisingly, he does not consider inter-faith dialogue a pressing necessity. ‘The only time I participated in that sort of thing was when a plane was hijacked to Afghanistan, and I was invited by a Sikh leader to attend a programme of priests from different communities to pray for peace’, he confesses.

The Padri rebuts the charge that he or his fellow Christians offer bribes to non-Christians to convert to Christianity. He argues that many non-Christians, plagued by some problem or the other, often come to him to ask him to pray for them and he does so, in the name of Jesus. Many of them do not return even if their prayers are answered, but some of them do and they request him to tell them about the Christian faith. ‘In that case’, he says, ‘we tell them about Jesus, that there is no other way to heaven than through him’. He admits, however, that he and his fellow missionaries have not registered much success in making converts, and attributes this, in large measure, to the fact that because most local Christians are of Dalit background others are reluctant to join what many wrongly see as a ‘Dalit religion’.

As a committed evangelist, the Padri is critical of many other Christian denominations, whom he accuses of being lukewarm in their commitment to mission and some of whose beliefs he condemns as ‘un-Christian’. He insists that members of his church are different from the Catholics and other Protestants. ‘I tell them not to marry outside our church’, he says, but admits that few listen to him.

I ask him what he feels about the Catholics. Does he believe that they are Christians, too? He does not answer the question directly but, instead, says, ‘They also believe in Jesus, but what can I say about them? They get massive aid from abroad, run big schools and drink alcohol. They give more respect to Mary than to Jesus and worship idols, which is totally against the teachings of Christianity’. He is also at pains to stress his distinction from the other Pentecostal groups in the Mohalla, some of which, he says, with unconcealed disapproval, get ‘foreign funds’.



F is a small town located on the Jammu-Srinagar highway. It has no local Christian population, most of its inhabitants being Hindus, with a minority of Muslim Gujjar cattle-grazers. Yet, it boasts of two Pentecostal ‘prayer houses’, both being part of a larger Pentecostal network which is liberally funded by rich patrons in the United States. R calls himself the ‘pastor’ of one of these ‘prayer houses’, which serves as his house as well, where he lives with his wife and two children. He was born in a ‘low’ caste Hindu family in Madhya Pradesh and converted to Christianity several years ago.

‘I used to worship Hanuman and Kali’, he tells me as he relates his conversion story, ‘and I wanted to become the richest man in the world’. Yet, he says, he lacked peace of mind. At the age of ten he ran away from his home and took a train that brought him to Jammu. He took to picking garbage and selling bottles and old plastic packets to eke out a livelihood as a *kabadi wala*. He got into bad company at this time, spending his hard earned money on drinking and drugs. That did not do away with his terrible mental torment, though, and he was driven to contemplating suicide.

Then one day he heard an announcement about a Pentecostal pastor who was scheduled to address a ‘Gospel Revival’ meeting in Jammu. He and his friends got together and decided to beat up the pastor, because



they thought that he was trying to convert Hindus to Christianity. When he got to the meeting and heard the pastor speak he suddenly changed his mind. 'The pastor was talking about the power of love and forgiveness', he says, 'and that really attracted me to him'. After the meeting was over, he met the pastor and confessed his sins. The pastor prayed for him, and gave him some Christian literature to read. Gradually, he was drawn to Christianity, and finally he asked the pastor to baptise him. Thereafter, he stopped working as a *kabadi wala*, and took to preaching instead, receiving financial support from the pastor to maintain himself and his family.

As an ardent Pentecostal, R believes in miracles, and says that God arms a select few among his followers with the power of healing in order to demonstrate the 'truth' of Christianity and to drive out evil spirits. He claims to have been blessed with this power as well, which he uses as a means to 'bring others to Christ'. He does this, so he says, by speaking in a host of mysterious tongues. He relates a long list of miracles that he is supposed to have performed, or rather, which the 'Holy Ghost' has allegedly wrought, using him as an instrument. 'God has done many things through me', he says somewhat immodestly.

I ask R why God cannot use him to miraculously solve the Kashmir conflict. He thinks for a while, gives me a stern look and says, 'Oh, that is a political question, which is something different. We can't stop the violence ourselves. Perhaps it is the will of God'. As he offers me this explanation, I see him wincing in pain as he complains about a large boil on his elbow. I ask him, somewhat provocatively, why he cannot miraculously cure his own ailment. He thinks I am being mean, and bluntly answers, 'No, I must not, because this is a test from God'.

R's way of looking at the world is decidedly Manichean. Christ and the Devil, he tells me as he hands me a leaflet explaining this theory, are locked in a deadly combat for the souls of men and for world domination. Christ works through the Pentecostal movement to pursue his plans, while other religions are, he seems to suggest, although he does not say it, hidden fronts of Satan. Jesus claimed, R declares, that those who believe in him would be saved, while all others, having been deceived by Satan, would perish in eternal damnation. Jesus is said to have also predicted that before his Second Coming the world would witness many deadly wars, as Satan stirs up human beings to fight each other. These wars, of which the ongoing conflict in Kashmir

is but one, cannot be stopped, R explains. They have to happen, for only then will Jesus appear in the world again, to herald the Day of Judgment. R believes that these wars are a test for the ‘true believers’. Only those who hold firmly to their faith in Jesus in these times of tribulation will go to heaven. One of their principal tasks at this time would be to spread the ‘word of Jesus’ so that those who care to hear and accept them can also be saved. Hence, R says, people like him believe that their prime duty is to preach the Gospel to the ‘unreached’.

This explains, R admits, why his church has set up the prayer house in this small town in the mountains of Jammu that has no local Christian inhabitants. Since the passionate urge to broadcast the ‘Good News’ of Jesus is the driving force behind the church’s mission, the work of the ‘prayer house’ is restricted simply to preaching. Unlike many other Christian groups, this particular denomination is not engaged in providing any social services to the local inhabitants. To do so, R seems to argue, is simply a waste of time. It would, he says, divert the attention of people to the snares of the world and cause Christian workers to deviate from their principal mission of preaching. Hence, R says, all he and his colleagues, including the missionary in the other ‘prayer house’ in the town, do is pray and preach. He hands me a glossy calendar produced by the Operation Agape and Associated Missions, Ludhiana, that funds his ‘prayer house’ to make the point. The calendar displays maps of the different Indian states, describing what it calls the main ‘people groups’ in each of these, along with special ‘prayer requests’ for them, pleading with God to assist them in their speedy conversion to Christianity.

R’s wife enters the room and offers me an apple and a cup of tea. She tells me that sometimes local people come to the ‘prayer house’ and ask them to pray for them, to cure them of an illness or to help them tide over their financial worries. They often also go to Hindu *sadhus* and Muslim *pirs* for this purpose, she relates, but when they fail they come to the ‘prayer house’ as a last resort in desperation. Sometimes, they find, or so she claims, that the prayers of the Christians are more effective. ‘Some Hindu and Muslim *babas*’, she says, ‘do have special powers, but that is all black magic since they are captive to evil spirits’. On the other hand, she claims, ‘the powers of the Christians are derived from God’.



Elias Rodrigues is the priest of St. Peter's Catholic Church, located at the far end of the Christian Mohalla. He hails from Vasai, near Bombay, where he served as a priest for several years. Like many other Catholic priests, he is highly educated, having first trained at a seminary and then having earned a doctorate – on the history of Bible-based Marathi literature.

The Catholic Church, Rodrigues explains, runs a number of institutions in Jammu town and outlying areas, including schools, hospitals and social work projects. The Church is also involved, in a very limited way, in inter-faith dialogue initiatives. Each of the 120 dioceses of the Catholic Church in India has a commission for dialogue, although they are not all very active. In Jammu, a major focus of Catholic dialogue efforts is to reach out to other Christian denominations, promoting a broad Christian ecumenism. The Church also organises, once or twice a year, functions to which it invites Hindu and Muslim religious and community leaders to discuss various social, as opposed to strictly religious, issues of common concern. It is difficult, Rodrigues says, to organise inter-faith programmes dealing specifically with religious issues. This is because such activities can easily be misunderstood as covert missionary efforts.

An informal, yet more effective, way of promoting dialogue, Rodrigues explains, is through interaction between people of different communities in the various institutions that the Church runs, most importantly its schools. Although Catholics are given preference in admission in these schools, the vast majority of students are non-Christians, mainly Hindus. Students attend regular moral science classes, where the basic principles of all the religions, he says, are taught.

I ask Rodrigues about the reports in the newspapers about mass conversions of Muslims to Christianity in Kashmir. He replies that these stories are grossly exaggerated, though he acknowledges that some conversions have indeed taken place. He refers to certain evangelical Protestant groups, generously funded from the West, that are active in the Valley. He admits that some of them are engaged in conversion, but says that they often inflate the numbers of the converts that they make in order to keep the money from their sponsors flowing in. 'They write back to America or wherever they get their funds from saying that they showed the Jesus film to X number of people and made Y number of baptisms, even if these numbers are false, and

thereby get a few thousand dollars, which translates into a fairly large sum in Indian rupees’, he says. Many of these groups are run by what he calls ‘half-baked, unemployed people’, for whom their work is simply a lucrative source of livelihood. ‘They get a house, a regular salary, sometimes a vehicle, and are appointed as heads of their church, which gives them a certain social status as *padri sahib*’, he explains. He berates these groups for exercising what he calls ‘moral force’ to make converts. ‘They openly claim that those who don’t believe in Jesus as the Son of God are Satanic or will go to Hell’, he complains. This, he explains, is bound to raise the hackles of Muslims and Hindus, and in any case, he tells me, is not in line with how he understands Christianity.

That, however, does not mean that he opposes voluntary conversion to any religion. ‘If someone wants to accept a certain religion he should be allowed to do so’, he insists. At the same time he says, ‘We want that Hindus should become good Hindus, Muslims, good Muslims and Christians, good Christians. Officially, we are not interested simply in increasing numbers’. However, he admits that some priests, who are ‘not properly conversant’ with the official Church doctrine, might think otherwise.

But what about allegations that the Church uses the services that it provides to promote its evangelical objectives, I ask him. He tells me that meeting the needs of the poor, or what he calls the ‘dialogue of life’, is a ‘good entry point’ to come close to people and to solve their problems. ‘But we don’t stop there. After all, we are not simply social workers or activists. We are motivated by the desire to share with the people the word of God’. He claims that this is not simply a clever means of propagating Christianity. ‘The Catholic Church’, he argues, ‘is now of the view that salvation is possible in all religions, even outside the Church’. He refers to the debates in the Second Vatican Council to point out that the Catholics are now meant to believe that there are ‘rays of truth’ in all religion, while still affirming that absolute truth lies in Jesus. Yet, he also adds that human understandings of Jesus are always limited, and none can be said to represent the absolute truth. This applies to the Catholic Church as well, which, he says, is both a divine as well as a human institution.

Somewhat confused with this tangled theological discussion, I ask Rodrigues to tell me if he, as a Catholic, believes that Hindus, for

instance, can be saved without believing in Jesus. 'I cannot say that they can't', he replies. 'God has His mysterious ways of saving people. Someone may not accept Jesus but at the same time may accept the truth that he stood for, the spirit of Jesus, and this may be reflected in his personal life. He may not be a Christian in the conventional sense, but in his life he may reflect authentic Christian values'. This way of understanding the possibility of salvation necessitates, Rodrigues insists, a revision of traditional notion of the Church. 'The Church must no longer be understood in narrow terms, as an institution. I see it as the spiritual union of all genuine believers, irrespective of the community to which they claim to belong', he argues.

'Christian values' must express themselves in service to the needy, he tells me. Genuine religion cannot be divorced from social concern. 'The divine isn't easily available to us directly. Often, we get access to the divine through other human beings, who are the sacraments of God', he says. This means that the notion that religion is a purely spiritual link between the individual and God is 'misplaced'. He cites a story from the Bible to illustrate his point. When Jesus was asked how one could enter the Kingdom of Heaven he replied that one should love God with all one's heart and love one's neighbour as oneself.

'I try and make this point in my sermons', Rodrigues tells me. The point needs to be constantly repeated because 'people think that simply by praying in a church or temple or mosque God will be pleased with them, even if they have no concern for the misery of others around them'. He refers to scores of poor, saffron clad men and women, who pass off as *sadhus*, who loiter in the streets of Jammu. 'If the *Hindutwalas* are really concerned about Hinduism', he asks, 'why don't they do anything for these people? In which way are these so-called *sadhus* contributing to society? They just live off the generosity of people, who give them free food'.

Rodrigues complains that the socially engaged understandings of religion that he pleads for are almost invisible in Jammu. 'People think that if you do your *puja-path* or *namaz* or Sunday worship you've fulfilled your responsibilities to God', he rues. Professional religious specialists are mostly to blame, he tells me. At the same time, he recognises the importance of forms of charity that are informed by traditional notions of piety. 'Just the other day', he says, 'I was at Mother Teresa's Home here in Jammu, and saw a Hindu family who came to

donate a load of old clothes and a walking stick. Their grandmother had recently died and they decided to give her belongings to the poor. I was so touched by that, and it struck me how that spirit of concern for others is really missing in the sort of ritualistic approach to religion that most of us adhere to’.



Ivan Pereira is the principal of St. Peter’s School, the largest Catholic Diocesan School in Jammu. He received his seminary education from Allahabad and Jalandhar and has been working in the Jammu area for eleven years. Like Rodrigues, he, too, recognises the importance of inter-faith dialogue work in the region but admits that little effort has been made to do this in an organised or sustained manner. One reason, he says, is that non-Catholic religious leaders have not expressed much interest in the issue. For their part, the Catholics are also understaffed. They have just 30 priests in the entire state, most of who are engaged in other work. Yet, in his own small way he says that in his school he tries to promote what he calls ‘the idea of religious values’ to the students, most of whom are Hindus. ‘Through lessons in moral science’, he says, ‘we ask students to look at religion from various angles, from a universal point of view in order to learn to respect other religions and their followers and to work together for the entire community’. He tells me how, through concrete examples, tries to convey this message. He cites the example of a Hindu priest employed in the army who arranged for a Christian funeral for the child of a Christian soldier. ‘I quoted this example to my students to show how people of different communities should relate to each other’, he says. ‘The point is’, he goes on, ‘that religion is meant to make you a better human being, and if it does not then your understanding of religion is faulty’.

As a committed Christian, Pereira is convinced that Jesus is the ultimate truth. Yet, he sees no contradiction between the imperative of mission and the need for dialogue. ‘The purpose of Jesus was to bring all human beings together in belief in the one God, through love and compassion’, he explains. ‘Many Catholic scholars today say that salvation is promised to all people, irrespective of religion, provided they lead pious lives’, he adds. ‘No matter what your religion, if you do what is right in the eyes of God, it means that God is guiding you. Truth is not the monopoly of any religion’.

We talk about the activities of the Church in the state and about how Hindus and Muslims perceive Christianity. Since the vast majority of

the Christians here are of Dalit background, he says, many Hindus and Muslims see Christianity as a 'low' caste religion. Yet, Pereira tells me, they do make a distinction between local Christians and the Goan and South Indian Catholic priests and nuns, whom they look upon with considerable respect, not least because they can speak English. Sometimes, he says, non-Christians come to the church to pray or to request the priests to pray for them. In the Jammu region, he says, there have been no violent attacks on Christian institutions by Hindu groups. The situation in the Kashmir Valley is more complicated, however. In the wake of reports of conversion of a number of Muslims to Christianity in the Valley some Christian institutions are now looked upon with suspicion by the militants, he says, but he adds that he visits Kashmir often but does not personally feel unsafe there. He admits that some conversions have taken place, possibly because people are increasingly tired of militancy, but says that the numbers are not as great as some missionary groups claim. Like Rodrigues, he lays much of the blame on the 'misplaced zeal' of certain right-wing Protestant groups, mostly foreign-funded, who insist that all non-Christians are destined for damnation in hell. Referring to what he calls 'little-educated' evangelical Protestant pastors, he says, 'Sometimes the truth suffers from the heat of its defenders, rather from its opponents. God has told us not to protect religion but to practice it'.

Deeds speak louder than words, Pereira explains, stressing that the aggressive missionary tactics of the Protestant fundamentalists is 'counter-productive', leading to conflict with other communities. 'A flower does not demand that you smell it. Its perfume attracts others by itself'. Likewise, he says, 'There is no need to loudly advertise your religion. People will be attracted to it only through your character, not through your propaganda'. That principle, he adds, holds true in the case of all religions. 'We need a paradigmatic shift in the ways in which we relate to people of other faiths', he concludes, and I nod my head in agreement.



Located on the outskirts of Jammu town, not far from the border with Pakistan is the village of Akalpur, where the Catholics have their only seminary in the state. Housed in a large and well-maintained campus, St. Paul's Seminary was established in 1996, and today it has 15 students training to become priests.

Father Kuriakose from Kerala is the principal of the seminary. He takes me around the campus, showing me the spotlessly clean prayer hall, classrooms and hostels. We pass by a group of students watering the lawn, while others wash their clothes and mend a machine. 'Jesus taught us to be servants of others, not masters', Kuriakose explains. He tells me that all the students are from outside the state, mainly from south India. After a short course of three years they will enrol in seminaries outside the state for higher theological training. I ask him why the seminary has no local Christian students. 'The Christian community in Jammu', he replies, 'is, on the whole, poor and uneducated'. Their faith, he claims, 'is not deep' and they are still wedded to a host of 'superstitions'.

Kuriakose admits that the Church is, in part, to blame for this situation although Catholics have been active in the state for more than a century. Not a single serving priest in the state is a local Dalit Christian, he points out. He also refers to the fact that many Catholic institutions, particularly schools, cater to the rich and the powerful. 'Jesus came to help the poor, not to help further enrich the rich', he says. For his part he has tried to make a difference by arranging for many Dalit students to enrol in the Nirmala Mata school that the Church runs in Akalpur.

Working for the poor and for inter-religious dialogue must form a central focus of the mission of the Church, Kuriakose stresses. Inter-religious dialogue, he explains, is 'not a luxury that one can choose to indulge in'. Rather, in a state like Jammu and Kashmir, it is a 'vital necessity'. However, he says, the Church has not taken this issue with the seriousness that it deserves. Not a single Catholic priest in the state, he tells me, has specialised in Hindu or Islamic studies, although in other states numerous priests have even done their doctorates in these fields. Knowing about other religions is a must for the mission of the Church, he says. Like the other Catholic priests I have met in Jammu, he struggles to reconcile his commitment to the belief in the absolute truth of Christ with the argument that salvation is indeed possible outside the confines of the Church. Kuriakose seems decidedly liberal, strangely so for the rector of a seminary. 'You can believe in whatever you want, because salvation does not depend on your beliefs but on your actions', he tells me, to my surprise. I do not know if he really means what he says, or perhaps I have not understood what he means to say, and I point out that several Catholic priests I know would vehemently disagree with his claim. I also refer to the abundant Catholic evangelical and



missionary literature that I spotted when sitting in the reception of the office of the Catholic Bishop of Jammu. Kuriakose hastens to defend himself and explains that while the Church does not deny its evangelical mission it is increasingly open to what he calls ‘spiritual inspiration’ from other faiths, whatever that might mean.

We talk about the Pentecostals, and I tell him about my encounters with them. He tells me that some Pentecostal groups are simply ‘trouble makers’. Not only do they denounce other faiths as aberrant or even ‘evil’, they also think that Catholics are not ‘proper’ Christians. ‘They probably make more converts among Catholics than among Hindus or Muslims’, he says half-jokingly. He sees a clear political agenda between these groups and their largely American financiers, preaching as they do a sternly literalist doctrine that has no room for social transformation, supporting a broader neo-imperialist agenda. ‘Enough blood has been shed in the name of religion’, he says, ‘and we must think of how to bring people together despite their differences, instead of driving them further apart’. I could hardly agree more, I tell him, as I get up to leave.

# Ladhakh

Ladakh, the northern-most part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, occupies almost two-thirds of its territory but accounts for just 2.7 % of its population. Ladakh consists of two districts: Kargil and Leh. Both the districts have a roughly equal population of a little more than a hundred thousand people. The majority of the population of Kargil, some 85 %, are Shi'a Muslims, most of whom belong to the Balti community. The remainder are mainly Buddhists, in the Zaskar valley, with a small minority of Sunni Muslims in Padum and Nurbakshi Muslims in the Dras area. In Leh, the overwhelming majority of the population is Buddhist, with a minority of Sunni, Shi'a Balti and Nurbakshi Muslims, who account for roughly 15 per cent of the population. Muslims are found in 25 out of the 112 villages of Leh. In most of these villages they form scattered minorities, although in some villages near Leh and in the Nubra Valley they account for a substantial proportion of the population. There is also a small Christian minority in the district.

Much has been written about the history of Buddhism in Ladakh. On the other hand, little literature is available about Ladakh's various non-Buddhist communities or on interaction between different communities in the region.<sup>10</sup> Through a number of interviews with religious specialists as well as 'ordinary' believers, this chapter seeks to highlight the diverse ways in which these communities relate to each other. The focus here is on the 'problem areas' in these relationships, such as rigid and insular ways of looking at the religious 'other'. The chapter also looks at the possibilities of evolving alternate ways of understanding religion, specifically Buddhism and Islam, to take cognisance of the multi-religious reality of Ladakh.

## *Buddhists, Muslims and Christians in Ladakh: A Brief Note*

A little more than half the population of Ladakh consists of Buddhists. Buddhism is said to have entered Ladakh in the first century CE from Kashmir. With the decline of Buddhism in the Kashmir Valley and the

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<sup>10</sup> For a general survey of Ladakhi history, culture and religion, see Parvez Dewan, *Ladakh*, New Delhi: Manas Publications, 2004.

Indian plains from the ninth century onwards, Ladakhi Buddhism came under the influence of Tibetan Mahayanism. Like its Tibetan counterpart, Ladakhi Buddhism is heavily influenced by Tantra and pre-Buddhist local traditions.

Muslims are the largest religious minority in Leh district. In Leh town Sunnis are the largest community after the Buddhists and are almost entirely of mixed Kashmiri-Turkistani-Ladakhi background. This explains why they are sometimes referred to as Argons or 'mixed race'. They are more commonly known as Khacha Pa, the word *Khacha Yul* meaning 'Kashmir' in the Ladakhi language.

According to a leading Sunni Ladakhi historian, Abdul Ghani Sheikh, Sunni Islam's first contact with Ladakh goes back to the eighth century, when Arab soldiers and traders began entering the area. He writes that by the mid-seventh century Arab armies had already conquered large parts of central Asia, which had close historical ties with Ladakh. In the late eighth century, during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mahdi (775-85), Arab armies reached as far as Tibet and had demanded tribute from the Tibetans. It is probable, Sheikh argues, that some Arab soldiers entered Ladakh at this time, although the available documentary evidence is fragmentary. Local legend has it that the Persian Sunni scholar and Kubrawi Sufi, Mir Sayyed 'Ali Hamadani, who played an important role in the introduction of Islam in Kashmir, passed through Ladakh in 1381/2. He is said to have built a mosque at Shey, then the capital of Ladakh, and at Padum, in Zanskar, although this is disputed. Not long after his supposed visit, some Muslim mystics of the Rishi order, such as Baba Zainuddin Rishi and Baba Nasiruddin Ghazi, are said to have travelled to Ladakh and Baltistan, and are credited with having made some converts to Islam in the area. The spread of Islam in Ladakh is said to have further accelerated after the conversion to Islam of the Ladakhi Buddhist ruler of Kashmir, Lha-chen-dngros-grub, in the early fourteenth century.

Ladakh witnessed a new influx of Muslims from the sixteenth century onwards, as Sunni Muslim traders from Kashmir began settling in the region. They were key players in the trans-Himalayan trade network along the Silk Route connecting West Asia with Tibet and China. They were welcomed by the Ladakhi Rajas, who saw them as playing a valuable role in the local economy. They were allotted their own special quarters in the capital city and lands to construct mosques. They married

local Buddhist women, and the Argons of today are descended from these unions. The Sunni community in Ladakh was further augmented after Ladakh became a vassal of the Mughals in the reign of Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century. Ladakhi rulers invited a number of Kashmiri Muslims to join their court as scribes to conduct official correspondence in Persian with the Mughal governors of Kashmir and also to help run the royal mint. At this time Sunni Muslims also began settling in small numbers in the Zaskar area in Kargil, as assistants to the local Buddhist rulers as well as traders.

The Shi'as of Leh are almost all of Balti stock, ethnically similar to the Buddhist Ladakhis and the western Tibetans. They trace their conversion to the sixteenth century Mir Shamsuddin Iraqi, who is credited with introducing Shi'a Islam in Kashmir and Baltistan. He and his disciples are said to have been responsible for the conversion of a number of Balti Buddhist princes to the Shi'a faith. Many of the local Shi'as, it is said, are descendants of migrants from Baltistan. They claim that they settled in Leh in the early seventeenth century, when the Ladakhi Buddhist ruler Jamyang Namgyal (1555-1610) married Gyal Khatun, daughter of Yebgo Sher Ghazi, the Shi'a prince of Khaplu. Gyal Khatun is said to have brought along with her a number of Balti Shi'as in her retinue. They were later accompanied by another group of Baltis who shifted to Ladakh following a devastating flood in Baltistan. Their descendants are now to be found in fairly sizeable numbers in Phyang, Shey, Chushot, Thiksey and Leh.

A third Muslim community in Ladakh are the Nurbakshis, followers of the fifteenth century Persian mystic Sayyed Muhammad Nurbaksh. Nurbaksh's own sectarian affiliation is disputed. Some claim that he was a Sunni of the Shafi' school and a Kubrawi Sufi. Others insist that he was a Shi'a, who concealed his faith out of fear of Sunni persecution. The Nurbakshis in Ladakh are today found chiefly in the Nubra Valley and in some villages near Dras, in Kargil. Larger numbers of Nurbakshis lives across the border in Baltistan, in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. Today, they are increasingly being targeted by Sunni and Shi'a missionary groups, who are now engaged in a fierce competition to bring them to their respective folds.

Although the consciousness of adhering to different religious systems remained strong, Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh historically shared a broadly similar culture. The local Muslims spoke Ladakhi and wore

the same dress, often with minor differences. Food habits were similar, except for the consumption of alcohol and carrion, which are forbidden in Islamic law. Given the Buddhist prohibition of killing animals, all the butchers in Ladakh were Muslims, and many Buddhist communities specially imported Muslim butchers from Kashmir and Baltistan to settle in their villages. At the popular level there was, in some cases, a blurring of religious boundaries. For instance, in several outlying areas Muslims would visit Buddhist oracles and healers for cures, and some Buddhists would attend the Balti mourning rituals for Imam Husain. Another revealing example in this regard is that of the royal ceremonies on the occasion of Losar, the Tibetan New Year. The Raja would pass through Leh at the head of a large procession, followed by his cavalry. The Buddhist head of the cavalry would visit the Sunni mosque in the town, offer oil for the lamps in the mosque, and ask for the blessings of the local imam. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Lo Pchak religious and trade mission sent every three years from Leh to Tibet bearing presents for senior Tibetan lamas was managed by Muslims and headed by a Ladakhi lama.<sup>11</sup>

Intermarriage between Argons, Baltis and Buddhists in Ladakh was fairly common until recently. Such marriages occurred among both 'ordinary' people as well as among the royalty. Thus, for instance, as mentioned above, the seventeenth century ruler of Ladakh, Jamyang Namgyal, married Gyal Khatun, daughter of the Shi'a ruler of Khaplu. Gyal Khatun remained a Muslim till her death, but she was regarded by many Buddhists as an incarnation of the White Tara, probably because her son, Singe Namgyal, rose to become the most famous ruler of Ladakh, playing a crucial role in the expansion of both Buddhism and the geographical boundaries of the Ladakhi kingdom. Another Ladakhi Raja, Nima Namgyal, was married to a Muslim princess, Zizi Khatun, who is said to have exercised a major role in running the affairs of the kingdom. Raja Pirang Namgyal married Begum Wangmu, daughter of a small Shi'a principality in Kargil. The son of the last independent ruler of Ladakh, Thundup Namgyal, also had a Muslim queen. Likewise, Hurchu Khan, the Shi'a ruler of a principality in Kargil, married a Ladakhi Buddhist princess.

The historical records speak of numerous wars were between the Ladakhi Buddhist kings and the Shi'a Muslim rulers of various small

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.75.

principalities in Baltistan. At the same time, they also mention a large number of marriages between the Shi'a and Ladakhi ruling houses. Political alliances often cut across religious boundaries. Thus, for instance, when Ladakh was invaded by a joint Tibetan-Mongolian army in 1681, the Ladakhi ruler appealed to the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb for help. In response to this request, the Mughal army, under Nawab Fidai Khan, entered Ladakh and, along with the Ladakhis, inflicted a heavy defeat on the invaders. In gratitude for this assistance, the Ladakhi ruler allotted a plot of land just below his palace in Leh to the Sunni Muslims of the town for a mosque. The mosque, which still stands, is now the central or Jami'a mosque of the Sunnis of Ladakh. In other words, one cannot speak in terms of a history of any inherent antagonism between Muslims and Buddhists, as entire communities, in the region. Ladakh has never known the sort of communal violence that many other parts of India have witnessed.

Christians form a small minority in Leh. There are no ethnic Ladakhi Catholics, all the local Christians being members of the Moravian church, one of the oldest evangelical Protestant denominations that has its roots in Eastern Europe. The founder of the church, John Hus, was a member of the faculty of Prague University. In his time the Catholic Church had assumed control over the churches in Bohemia and Moravia, and sought to forcibly impose its own liturgy on them. Hus and his followers fiercely opposed this, insisting that the Bible, not the Pope, represented the true standard of Christian belief. For his defiance he was condemned by the Catholics as a heretic and burnt at the stake in 1415. After his death, a group of his followers broke away and set up the Moravian Church (*Unitas Fratrum* in Latin) in 1457. Today, the Moravians have a fairly strong presence in Western Europe and North America. They identify themselves as an evangelical church, and are involved in missionary work in many countries, inspired by their belief that Christianity represents the only way to salvation.

The presence of the Moravian church in India dates back to 1853, when its first missionaries landed in Calcutta. Three years later they established a mission in Keylong, the main town in the largely Buddhist district of Lahaul, in what is now Himachal Pradesh, adjoining Ladakh. In 1885 they received permission for a permanent station in Leh. The last of their foreign missionaries departed in the early 1950s and were replaced by local Ladakhis. There are some 150 ethnic Ladakhi Christians today. Most of them live in Leh, Shey and Khaltse. The vast

majority of them are of Buddhist origin, although a few of them claim Balti and Argon descent. In recent years a number of Buddhist and Hindu Nepalis, mainly employed as workers in restaurants and shops in Leh, are said to have joined the church as well.

### ***Inter-Communal Relations in Leh: Recent Developments***

Traditionally, as pointed out above, relations between the principal religious communities in Leh district have been fairly cordial. However, recent years have witnessed a marked deterioration in relations, owing primarily to various political developments. This finally culminated in a social boycott by the Buddhists of the Muslims of Leh district, declared and enforced by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) in 1989. The boycott remained in force till 1992, and witnessed several clashes between Buddhist and Muslim youth, incidents of police firing in which three people lost their lives, the burning down of several Muslim homes and even cases of forced conversion of Muslims to Buddhism. During the boycott Buddhists who visited their Muslim relatives or patronised Muslim shops were penalised by LBA activists, and social relations between the two communities were almost completely severed. Relations between the Buddhists and Muslims in Leh have improved considerably after the lifting of the boycott, although suspicions still remain.

The boycott came as a culmination of a series of agitations spearheaded by local Buddhist groups against what they saw as Kashmiri Muslim 'colonialism'. No sooner had Jammu and Kashmir acceded to the Indian Union than the Buddhists of Ladakh began protesting against Shaikh 'Abdullah and the Kashmir-dominated state. The first budget of Jammu and Kashmir after 1947 allocated no funds for Ladakh, and, in fact, the region had no separate plan till 1961. In May 1949, Chewang Rigzin, President of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, sent a memorandum to the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru; pleading that Ladakh should not be bound by the outcome of a plebiscite in the state if the majority of its inhabitants chose to join Pakistan. He suggested that Ladakh be governed directly by the Government of India or be amalgamated with the Hindu-majority parts of Jammu to form a separate province or else be incorporated into East Punjab. Failing this, he said, Ladakh would be forced to consider joining Tibet. Nehru shared the LBA's concerns, but urged it not to insist on its demands on the grounds that any constitutional or administrative action could weaken India's stand on Kashmir in the United Nations.

The LBA then began to press for greater internal autonomy for Ladakh. It demanded the formation of a Ministry of Ladakh Affairs headed by a popularly elected Ladakhi member of the Legislative Assembly; adequate representation in the legislature and civil service; more development funds for constructing roads and canals and promoting agriculture and horticulture; and replacement of the Kashmiri police by local personnel. It wanted Ladakhi in the Tibetan or Bodhi script to be made the medium of instruction in local schools in place of Urdu and special provisions to be made for facilitating higher education and training in medicine, law, engineering, agriculture and forestry in the region. It argued that Ladakh should bear essentially the same relationship with the state of Jammu and Kashmir as that between Kashmir and India, with the local legislature being the only competent authority to make laws for Ladakh.

In the years that followed, state allocations for Ladakh increased and the state government set up a ten-member Ladakh Development Commission, but these were seen as inadequate steps by the Buddhists of Leh, who kept up their demand for autonomy. Thus, in turn, led to growing political differences between the Ladakhi Muslims and Buddhists. In 1969, the alleged desecration of a Buddhist flag by a Muslim, the stoning of the Jami‘a Masjid and Imambara in Leh by a Buddhist procession and subsequent reactions in Kargil led to a heightening of the communal divide. The Buddhist Action Committee raised a number of new demands, including Scheduled Tribe status for the Ladakhis, settlement of Tibetan refugees in Ladakh, construction of a rest house in Kargil, recognition and introduction of the Bodhi language as a compulsory subject till the high school level, and provision of a full-fledged cabinet minister to represent Ladakh. Some of these demands were met by the state government but the others were not accepted, perhaps because they were strongly opposed by the Muslim Action Committee in Kargil, who feared that they would result in further Buddhist domination in the region. The Shi‘a Muslims of Kargil now began to see their interests as being inextricably linked to Kashmir, despite a complete absence of cultural and ethnic ties with the Kashmiri Muslims, the vast majority of whom, in contrast to the Kargilis, are Sunnis.

In 1980, police firing on Buddhist agitators demanding regional autonomy resulted in the setting up of the All-Party Ladakh Action Committee to spearhead the autonomy movement. Shortly after, a



parallel Kargil Action Committee was set up, constituted by the National Conference and the Congress, which demanded provincial status for the two districts of Leh and Kargil on the pattern of the Jammu and Kashmir divisions. The Kargilis were, obviously, apprehensive of being included along with the Buddhists of Leh in an autonomous Ladakh. Taking advantage of these divisions, the state government used the Kargil Action Committee's stand to reject the demand for Ladakhi regional autonomy on the plea that all Ladakhis did not want it.

The outbreak of militancy in Kashmir in 1989 convinced many Buddhists in Leh that their future was insecure in Jammu and Kashmir. Many of them feared what they saw as a possible Muslim takeover of their land. This fear was strengthened both by the Kashmiri demand for total independence or merger with Pakistan of the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir, including Ladakh, as well as the fact that the population growth rate in Kargil was considerably higher than in Leh, which meant that in a few decades the Buddhists would be in a clear minority in Ladakh as a whole. To add to this were continued charges of neglect by the Kashmir government and discrimination against Buddhists in fund allocations and appointment to government jobs. The question of regional autonomy for Leh was now increasingly being framed in communal terms, as a Muslim-Buddhist conflict.

A scuffle between a Buddhist youth and four Muslims in Leh on July 1989 set off a major agitation in Leh. This led to clashes in Leh town, which then spread to other parts of the Leh district. The Jammu and Kashmir Armed Police are said to have fired at Buddhist demonstrators, killing some of them. They are also alleged to have forcibly entered Buddhist homes, desecrated objects of worship, resorted to indiscriminate beating of locals and looting of property. These actions led the LBA to embark upon a violent struggle, once again demanding the separate constitutional status of a Union Territory for Ladakh. Shortly after, the LBA declared a complete economic and social boycott of the Muslims. By this time the LBA is said to have established close links with Hindutva organisations in India.

The boycott was initially directed at the Kashmiri Muslims, who controlled the local administration, as well as the Ladakhi Sunni Muslims, who dominated the economy of Leh town, and who were seen as 'Kashmiri agents' and as opposed to the Buddhists' demand for autonomy. The boycott was later extended to the Shi'as as well

after they made common cause with Sunni organisations. The boycott was finally lifted in 1992, after the Government of India convinced the LBA that it would not consider its demands if it carried on with the boycott. An agreement was then entered into by the LBA and the Ladakh Muslim Association (LMA), representing both the Shi'as and the Sunnis of Leh. The Government of India, after much procrastination, then set up the Leh Autonomous Hill Council, providing the Leh district with considerable internal autonomy. With this, many of the demands of the LBA were met.

In 1995, when the Leh Autonomous Hill Council was set up, the Kargilis were offered a similar deal. They, however, declined the offer, believing that it would undermine the authority of the Kashmir government, whom they tended to look upon as their ally. However, probably witnessing the considerable development that Leh has seen in recent years, partly because it now enjoys a degree of autonomy, the Kargilis agreed to the setting up of the Kargil Autonomous Hill Council, which came into being in 2003. This, however, has been met with stiff resistance from the Buddhist minority in the Zaskar region in Kargil, who see the move as against their interests, and who have now started demanding a separate autonomous territory for themselves.

The setting up of the Leh Autonomous Hill Council appeared to have settled matters somewhat. However, in 2000, when the then Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister, Farooq 'Abdullah, tabled a resolution in the state assembly calling for the restitution of the pre-1953 status of Jammu and Kashmir as an autonomous entity within the Indian Union, the LBA once again protested and demanded that Ladakh be declared a Union Territory. The LBA feared that if the pre-1953 status were restored, Ladakh would be turned into a 'colony' of Kashmir. In the wake of a week-long stir in Leh in June 2000, the LBA President Tsering Samphel insisted, 'The only way out is to let Ladakh assume a Union Territory status'. He declared that if the LBA's demands were not met, it would 'approach the United Nations, pleading to somehow protect our cultural identity'. Lobzang Nyantak, the leader of the LBA's youth wing went to the extent of cautioning the state and Union governments that, 'The God-fearing folk of this region would be forced to take up arms if their long-pending demand remained ignored...[and] it will only be for the administration to blame if we happened to resort to the warpath. It [violence] may appear anti-religious, but the motive, nonetheless, is to protect our identity'. Not surprisingly, the LBA's

demand for the trifurcation of the state on essentially communal lines was warmly welcomed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party, who are said to have seen the LBA as an ally against the Muslims.

Today, the vast majority of the Buddhists of Leh are said to solidly back the Union Territory demand, and some Muslims of Leh have also supported it. However, it is likely that some local Muslims oppose the demand, for fear of being dominated by the more advanced Buddhists, although they are careful not to be vocal in their opposition. Likewise, the majority of the Muslims of Kargil are vehemently opposed to Union Territory status for Ladakh. They refuse to consider joining Leh in a separate Union Territory because they feel that Kargil, considerably poor and under-developed compared to Leh, would suffer neglect at the hands of a Buddhist-dominated administration. Further, they also do not wish to separate from Muslim-majority Kashmir, although, at the same time, most Kargilis do not support the secessionist struggle in the Valley. The ongoing political tussle, which underlies the communal schism, is further exacerbated by the fact that the Ladakh region, including Kargil and Leh, has just one parliamentary seat. During elections, Buddhist and Shi'a leaders are said to consistently pander to communal prejudices to mobilise votes for the single seat. A possible solution to this problem is, as some people have suggested, to increase the number of parliamentary seats to two, one each for Shi'a-majority Kargil and Buddhist-majority Leh. Alternately, the single seat could be allocated on a rotational basis, for one term to Leh and for the next to Kargil.

Although the roots of the communal divide in Leh are, thus, largely political, they also have an underlying religious dimension. Religion in Leh is, as elsewhere, often used as a mobilisational device by politicians, both Muslim as well as Buddhist, that leads to further mistrust between the communities. Besides, many religious leaders appear to have a negative image of other communities and their religions. These understandings, in turn, are contested by some of their co-religionists, who seek, in their own ways, to promote better relations between the communities. The following section provides glimpses into these diverse and deeply contested ways of understanding and imagining Islam, Buddhism and Christianity in the context of contemporary Leh.



In his early 30s, Namgyal is a lama at the Thiksey *gonpa*, a sprawling centuries-old monastery some 15 kilometres from Leh. Like most other lamas, he has spent most of his life in the monastery, having entered it when he was just seven. Life in the monastery follows a strict routine. Namgyal spends most of the day reading Buddhist texts, teaching these to junior lamas and officiating at prayer ceremonies in the monastery as well as in people's homes.

Namgyal's family lives in a village, which has a sizeable Muslim minority. Most of the Muslims in his village are Baltis, with only a few Argon families. He tells me that relations between the different communities were fairly cordial till the boycott of 1989. Inter-marriage was quite common. In fact, an aunt of his is from a Balti family, while his father's cousin sister is married to an Argon. While such marriages were not approved of, they still happened. 'For a few days there would be opposition from both sides', he says, 'but soon the families would reconcile themselves to the situation'. Inevitably, such marriages ended up in the wife converting to the husband's religion. Namgyal claims, and he is probably right, that more Buddhist women than Muslim women married outside their community.

Everyone I have met in Ladakh points to 1989 as the turning point in Buddhist-Muslim relations. Namgyal was not very clear as to what exactly triggered off the conflict that year. 'I hardly step out of the monastery, so I really am not aware of what's happening in the world outside', he explains. He tells me that it was possibly a scuffle between by a group of Sunni Muslims and Buddhist youth in Leh that set off a chain counter-attacks that finally culminated in the declaration of an economic and social boycott of the Muslims by the Buddhists. 'I am not sure if we should have instituted the boycott', Namgyal says. Boycotting an entire community is not in accordance with the Buddhist *dhamma*, he tells me, although he admits that several lamas were also involved in enforcing the boycott at several places. 'These were younger lamas who do not have a proper knowledge of Buddhism', he claims. On the other hand, he says that some other lamas tried to oppose the boycott but were forced to keep silent by Buddhist youth who had, as he puts it, 'simply gone out of control'.

Namgyal confesses to know little about Islam, but simply says, 'All religions are good. They all teach love and compassion. Who knows, Ram, Krishna, Christ and Muhammad may all have been forms of the

Buddha'. He, therefore, sees no reason why one should convert to another religion or seek for others to do so. 'Let everyone serve his own religion and in that way we can all live together in peace', he stresses. Right action, rather than religious beliefs, he goes on to tell me, are of central importance. One can learn and adopt the good things in other religions without abandoning one's own religion. It is pointless proclaiming the superiority of one religion over the other if one does not actually practice 'true' religion, which, as Namgyal defines it, is a form of inspiration that gives one peace as well as leads one to help those in need. The main aim of the Buddha's mission was to end suffering, and this means that one should be concerned about the sufferings of all creatures, not simply of one's co-religionists. Different religions, Namgyal believes, are different ways for proper living, and are devised to appeal to people with different mentalities. 'The three poisons of ignorance, desire and hatred, are found inside you. Kill them by following the noble eight-fold path of the Buddha and all your enmities will be destroyed', he says. All religions, so Namgyal claims, teach the same thing.

At the same time, however, Namgyal opines that many Muslims he knows are 'overly aggressive about their religion', but he makes a distinction between the Baltis and the Argons. He sees the Baltis as being closer to the Buddhists than the Argons are. After all, he reminds me, their ancestors were Buddhists at one time, and they speak the same language (with some minor variations in Kargil), look the same and share many cultural practices in common with the Buddhists. 'They are simple, hardworking and honest people, not quarrelsome like the Argons', he says. He contrasts them with the Argons, whom he describes as 'crafty and untrustworthy'. 'Before the boycott the Argon youth were very aggressive. They would tease our girls in the streets and leave no opportunity to pick a fight with anyone', he claims.

Namgyal echoes a view that many Ladakhis, both Muslims and Buddhists, express, that relations between the Buddhists and Muslims have drastically been transformed as a result of the boycott. 'We are not as close as we were before', he says. Inter-marriages, fairly common in the past, are now rare. Many Muslim women, he says, somewhat in complaint, now wear head-scarves, something hitherto unknown in Ladakh. Traditional Muslim wedding ceremonies, accompanied by music and dance, are being replaced by simple functions. Fewer Muslims now attend the festivals at the monasteries. In the past, he

says, several Muslims, mainly Baltis, would come to him to ask him for prayers to cure a range of illnesses, but now few do. He sees this as a result of ‘the propaganda of the mullahs’, but, when I point out that it may, in part, be a reaction to the sufferings the Muslims underwent during the boycott he hesitatingly agrees.



X works for the Ladakh Buddhist Association, an organisation of mainly lay Buddhists that spearheaded the boycott of the Muslims. I met him at the LBA office, which is situated in the premises of the Jokhang monastery, near the Sunni mosque in the heart of Leh’s main bazaar.

‘The boycott began because some Argons teased a group of Buddhist girls in Leh’, X claims, offering a slightly different version of the events from what Namgyal provides. Some Buddhist youth protested, and this then led to clashes in the town. In some villages, he admits, Muslim houses were burnt down and families were forced to flee to Leh. Three lives were lost in police firing in Leh and in the nearby village of Shey. Many Kashmiri traders in Leh were forced to close their shops and go back to Kashmir. The boycott lasted for some three years, kept alive, X proudly says, by the LBA, and supported by numerous lamas. ‘We forbade Buddhists from buying things from Muslim shops or travelling in Muslim vehicles’, he gloats. The boycott finally gave over after the Muslims promised to stop inter-religious marriages. However, he warns, ‘These things are still happening, and many more Muslims are marrying Buddhist girls than the other way round. If they continue like this the situation might become volatile again’. He repeats the claim that I have heard many Buddhists make that the Muslims offer monetary inducements to Buddhist girls to convert and marry Muslim men, an allegation that many Muslims rebut.

I ask X if he believes that the boycott and the ensuing violence were in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha. He hesitates and thinks for a while and then replies, ‘It is true that the Buddha taught non-violence and compassion for all creatures’. ‘At the same time’, he says in his defence, ‘the Buddha taught that we must protect our religion, which is what the boycott was intended for’. He goes on to tell me the story (apocryphal or not, I do not know) of a Buddhist monk who killed a man because the otherwise the man would have killed 999 other people. ‘In this way’, he says, ‘the monk saved so many lives by

taking just one'. He uses the story to justify the boycott. 'If we simply preach compassion', he tells me, 'Buddhists will become extinct in Ladakh and the Muslims will take over'. He refers to Afghanistan and the Kashmir Valley, which were Buddhist at one time. The Buddhists there, he says, 'stuck to compassion', and that was why Islam was able to 'drive Buddhism out' from these regions. He compares that with the situation in Ladakh today, where, he says, if the Buddhists do not get organised to protect their religion 'Islamist militants will take over'.

I can empathise with his predicament, although I cannot agree with his justification for a boycott of an entire community. I refer to the stance of the Dalai Lama during the boycott crisis, reminding him that the Dalai Lama had condemned the boycott and had urged Buddhists and Muslims to solve their differences peacefully. At this, X suddenly does an about-turn and stutters: 'Yes, maybe the boycott was wrong, maybe it was un-Buddhist'. He, however, continues to maintain that it was a 'natural reaction' to Kashmiri and Argon 'wrong-doings'.

After the lifting of the boycott Buddhist-Muslim relations in Leh are now 'almost normal', X tells me, although irritants remain, such as the continued, though now considerably reduced, instances of intermarriage. He tells me of how visiting each other's houses, a common occurrence in the past, has now declined, a result of the boycott. The boycott has also affected the local economy. In the past most of the shops and vehicles in Leh were owned by the Argons and Kashmiris, but during the boycott the Buddhists set up their own shops and bought their own vehicles. Now, he tells me with evident pride, the Buddhists dominate Leh's economy, a fact that many Argons resent.

X, clearly, has a low opinion of the Muslims. 'They do not have any respect for us and our religion', he complains. 'From childhood they learn that *k* stands for *kafir*, so how can you expect them to love us?' He talks about how many Muslims now consciously seek to distance themselves from the Buddhists, abandoning many local customs and practices and becoming more self-consciously 'Islamic'. He claims that the Muslims are 'inherently militant', so much so that 'they cannot resist fighting among themselves'. He talks about Sunnis in Kargil who took out a pro-Saddam demonstration during the Gulf War and were beaten up by Shi'a youth to back his claim. 'The Shi'as and Sunnis actually detest each other but put up a united front against the Buddhists', he claims. He also tells me of what he and many Buddhists

see as the looming threat of Islamist militancy spreading to Ladakh, although he admits that the militants enjoy little support among the local Muslims, particularly the Baltis. He refers to the killing of three lamas of the Rangdum monastery in Zaskar by militants some years ago, and says, 'If the militants have their way they will destroy all our monasteries'.

The LBA, X tells me, is 'passionately pro-India'. He makes the obvious point that joining Pakistan is simply not an option for the Buddhists. 'We'll be wiped out there if we do', he says. Ideally, he explains, Ladakh should be separated from Jammu and Kashmir and made a Union Territory. 'We have nothing in common with the Kashmiris and so there's no reason why we should stay on with them'.



Dr. Tashi Paljor is the Principal of the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS) at Choglamsar, near Leh, one of the leading Buddhist research and teaching institutions in India. Originally from Lahaul in Himachal Pradesh but having lived in Ladakh for many years, he is a well-known authority on Ladakhi Buddhism.

Paljor tells me about the Buddhist solution to the problem of inter-religious conflict. 'The Buddha taught', he says, 'that we should treat all creatures as our own mother, for in one of our past lives they could have been our mother'. The enemy is within, rather than without. If the 'internal enemies', of desire, jealousy and envy, are destroyed, the enemy no longer remains. There is no need for religious conversion, he argues. One should remain in one's own religion, discarding anything in it that might not appeal to reason, while not hesitating to take the good things from all other religions. Following the path of compassion (*karuna*) of the Buddha, one should love all creatures, including people of different communities, equally, and work for the end of all forms of suffering. In this way, he says, all human beings, indeed all created beings, can be happy. The key lies in overcoming the 'illusion' of the self, the ego, which is the cause for desire and which inevitably leads to conflicts of all forms. Overcoming the 'illusion' of the ego, one is led to realise the 'principle of interconnection and interdependence' between different creatures, which, in turn, leads to a healthy respect for religious pluralism.

That, I admit, is fine in theory, I reply, but what about the situation in Ladakh? What about the problematic relations between Buddhists and



Muslims? Paljor tells me that he believes many Muslims regard Buddhists, like other non-Muslims, as ‘enemies of God’ or at least as followers of ‘falsehood’. ‘This is a major problem in promoting good relations’, he complains, although he does say that following the lifting of the boycott things have improved. Now that Leh has its own Autonomous Hill Council, Buddhist-Muslim relations are back to ‘almost normal’, but Paljor believes that there is no guarantee that the Kashmir government will not seek to dilute the powers of the Council. That is why, he says, many Ladakhi Buddhists, including the LBA, are now demanding Union Territory status for Leh.

Paljor introduces me to Geishe Konchok Namgyal, who teaches Buddhist philosophy at the CIBS. Namgyal describes Buddhist-Muslim relations in Ladakh as ‘a unique model’, and says that, barring the period of the boycott, there have been no incidents of conflict between the two communities in the past. It is true, he says, that Ladakhi Buddhist kings sometimes fought with Muslim kings, such as the Shi‘a rulers of Skardu and Baltistan, but these were not communal riots or religious wars. They did not involve entire communities but only professional armies. Many of the Buddhist kings had Muslim soldiers and even Muslim wives. Likewise, numerous Shi‘a kings married Buddhist women. Even today, Namgyal informs me, in some remote areas, such as in Dah-Hanu in Kargil, there are families in which one brother is a Muslim and the other a Buddhist.

Namgyal admits that the boycott had a major impact on Buddhist-Muslim relations. It was, he says, wrong to boycott an entire community, but he argues that the Buddhists did have genuine grievances, which then led to ‘a mob mentality’ which then ‘went out of control’. With Leh having now been granted its Autonomous Hill Council, in which Muslims are also represented, he opines that a repeat of the boycott will not happen. But, he says, religious leaders must play a pro-active role in promoting better relations between Muslims and Buddhists, because that is not a task that can be left to politicians alone. He tells me that the CIBS has invited Muslim leaders to attend functions, such as receptions for the Dalai Lama. In turn, sometimes Muslim leaders invite Buddhist lamas to Muslim gatherings. But, he admits, this is not done in any organised way as such and that much more needs to be done.



The Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre occupies a sprawling campus outside the Tibetan refugee settlement of Choglamsar, not far from Leh. The Centre is engaged in a variety of activities, including promoting education, healthcare and interfaith dialogue, and represents a new form of socially engaged Buddhism. Smala Phuntsog works as a doctor in the Mahabodhi Karuna hospital that the Centre has recently opened. He is also the secretary of the Leh chapter of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF).

Relations between Muslims and Buddhists in Ladakh, he tells me, have traditionally been harmonious. He explains the boycott as an ‘aberration’ and as a ‘political thing’. Yet, he stresses, organised efforts must be made to promote inter-faith dialogue, especially because the youth are increasingly ‘straying from the path of their elders’.

Phuntsog hands me a bunch of leaflets about his Centre, including some that detail its own role in promoting communal harmony in Leh. The Centre has held a number of inter-faith meetings, the latest being just a month before, which was sponsored by the IARF. At the latest meeting Sunni, Shi‘a, Buddhist and Christian religious leaders spoke on the importance of peace and harmony from the perspective of their own religions. The meeting culminated in a peace march through the streets of Leh, raising slogans in support of peace. The previous year, a similar meeting was jointly sponsored by the local Sunni and Shi‘a community organisations.

‘Live and let live’ is Phuntsog’s answer to my query as to how people of different faiths can live together. Since no humans think exactly alike, they should be free to believe in whatever they want, and must respect the freedom of others to do so. He tells me how at the Centre there are a number of Muslim employees as well as students in the Centre’s school. ‘We all live together here at the Centre, no problems at all’, he says.

The Buddhist way of dealing with religious pluralism, Phuntsog tells me, is through tolerance and dialogue. He recites an excerpt from the daily morning Buddhist prayer to illustrate this approach: ‘May all sentient beings be happy and free from misery. May this state be for all’.



The Shi‘a mosque in Leh is located at the foot of the grand palace of the Ladakhi kings. It has recently been renovated in Iranian-style, but its painted beams, with their intricate floral designs, still betray the Tibetan-style architecture of the original structure. The mosque serves as a major community centre for the Shi‘as of the town, who are almost all Baltis, with a small minority of Kashmiri Shi‘a traders.

I met Husain at the mosque one evening as the prayers got over. Husain is a Balti and runs a small shop in town. Like many other Baltis, he complains of the discrimination that he claims that his community suffers both from the Buddhists as well as the Sunnis. ‘We are the poorest and least educated community in Ladakh’, he tells me. ‘This world and its glamour are not for Muslims’, he explains. ‘Let non-Muslims enjoy the luxuries of this world. We will enjoy bliss in the hereafter, while others will suffer in hell’.

Part of Hussain’s family is Buddhist – his mother was Buddhist before she married his father – but yet Husain has a low opinion of the Buddhists. ‘They have no sense of shame or modesty’, he says. ‘They drink and dance and make money by selling their religion to foreign tourists’. That is why, he says, they are economically better off than the Baltis. For the Baltis, he says, ‘religion is more important than anything else in this world’.

Many Buddhists may be ‘very nice and gentle human beings’, Husain admits. But still the fact that they ‘worship idols’, he believes, means that they are ‘impure’. The Baltis, Husain tells me, refuse to eat food cooked by the Buddhists or any other non-Muslims. ‘So strict are some of us in this regard that the mere physical touch of a non-Muslim is considered to be polluting, which can only be purified through a bath or by cleaning the part of the body touched with mud’, he says. This Balti practice is said to be evenly more strictly observed in Kargil, where Baltis are in an absolute majority.

This is the first time that I hear about a Muslim form of ‘untouchability’, and I ask Husain to explain. ‘Our *maulvis*’, he replies, ‘tell us that it is written in the Qur’an that the *kafirs* are polluted (*najis*) and that is why we do not eat their food’. Not surprisingly, Husain confesses not to know Arabic and not to have read the Qur’an himself. ‘This is what the *maulvis* tell us, and we must listen to what they say because they have read the Qur’an’, he says in his defence when I tell him that I have read the Qur’an myself but have not come across any reference

to the claim that non-Muslims must be treated as 'untouchables'. 'Yes', Husain replies, 'That is what the Sunnis also say. They have no problem about eating Buddhist food, but the Sunni interpretation, our *maulvis* tell us, is wrong'.

Another reason why the Baltis refuse to eat food cooked by Buddhists, Husain explains, is that the Buddhists drink alcohol, which is forbidden in Islam. 'So strict is the Islamic prohibition on drinking', he tells me, that Imam 'Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, whom the Shi'as, in particular, deeply revere, 'once stated that if a drop of alcohol should fall into a pond and the pond later dries up and grass sprouts there, and if a goat eats the grass still the animal should not be eaten'. 'So how', says Husain as he winds up his little sermon, 'can we eat Buddhist-cooked food?'

At the same time as Husain thinks that the Buddhists, being non-Muslims, are 'impure', he also says that Islam does not forbid friendship with the Buddhists or other non-Muslims. He refers to a verse of the Qur'an that forbids Muslims from criticising the deities worshipped by others because others might, in turn, criticise Allah. The Qur'an also says, he informs me, that God does not forbid Muslims from dealing justly with those non-Muslims who are not aggressors and who leave Muslims alone in peace.

Husain tells me that he has a number of Buddhist friends and also regularly visits them and his several Buddhist relatives. Although Buddhists willingly eat food cooked by Baltis, he says, when Baltis visit Buddhist houses they accept only 'dry' food, such as biscuits or uncooked things. But biscuits and similar things, I point out, might well have been prepared by non-Muslims in factories, and so how is it, I ask, that these can be consumed? Husain thinks for a while and then answers, quite conveniently, 'These factory-produced things could also have been prepared by Muslims, so in case of food items where the producer is anonymous, we are allowed to eat them'. Similarly, rules of pollution and purity can be relaxed while on a journey, 'out of compulsion' (*halat-i majburi mai*).

We talk about the boycott and Husain tells me that although many Baltis, 'swayed by the Argons', initially opposed the Buddhist demand for Hill Council status for Leh, they now are 'forced' to support the cause of autonomy because they are a vulnerable minority. He, however, acknowledges that the Hill Council has brought about considerable

development in the area, which has benefited many Baltis as well. Autonomy for Leh, he says, is probably a good thing, although, like many other Baltis, he fears that if Leh is separated from Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir the Baltis might suffer. He does not see the possibility of another boycott, as many Buddhists have now opened hotels and operate vehicles and a repeat of 1989 would hurt them badly.

Husain, echoing the views of almost all the Shi‘as I have met in Ladakh, says that the Baltis in general are vehemently opposed to the idea of joining Pakistan. He tells me about how some Kashmiri Sunni traders and government employees working in Leh ‘tell the Baltis that they must support the militant movement against India’ and of how the Baltis refuse to agree. ‘We look down on the Buddhists but still they treat us very well’, he says, a strain of guilt evident in his voice, ‘but, on the other hand, in Pakistan the Sunnis don’t consider the Shi‘as as physically impure but still the Shi‘as are badly persecuted there’. ‘It’s best for the Shi‘as of Ladakh’, he insists, ‘that Kashmir remains with India’. ‘After all’, he adds somewhat philosophically, ‘we eat the salt of India, so how can we praise Pakistan?’



A short distance from Leh, on the other side of the Indus river, is the sprawling village of Chushot, said to be the largest village in the Leh district. The majority of Chushot’s inhabitants are Balti Shi‘as. Chushot boasts of a centuries-old Shi‘a *imambara*, a congregational hall dedicated to the twelve Shi‘a Imams. The structure has recently been renovated in a decidedly Iranian mode, although a few traces of its earlier traditional Ladakhi appearance are still visible. Inside, the pillared hall is decorated with thick Persian-style carpets, black flags with Arabic slogans embroidered on them, and pictures of the Ayatollah Khomeini and other such Iranian religious leaders.

A turbaned Shi‘a cleric stands before a podium delivering an impassioned address, while a large crowd of villagers sits below in rapt attention. It is the birthday of Imam Husain, the martyred grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and a *majlis*, a gathering in honour of the Imam is underway. The cleric repeats his point over and over again, about the bravery of the Imam and the tyranny of his killers and so on, till the crowd is driven to loud sobs. The *majlis* continues for well over two hours and is then followed by a community feast.

The crowd makes its way out of the *imambara*, and on the steps I meet Hasan, a Balti college student. We walk down to the Indus nearby, and settle down on a sand-dune in the sun. I ask him to tell me about the history of the *imambara*. It was built a long time ago, he says, but no one knows when exactly. However, he says he has heard of a miracle associated with the shrine, familiar to almost every denizen of Chushot, which he proceeds to relate. Once, he tells me, some dacoits attempted to loot the famous Hemis *gonpa*, the largest Buddhist monastery in all Ladakh. They were foiled in this when a range of high mountains suddenly appeared in front of them, blocking entrance into the monastery. The dacoits were then forced to change their plans. They headed towards Chushot, in order to raid the *imambara*, but when they approached the shrine the Indus suddenly rose to surround it on all four sides. Just then, Staksan Rinpoche, the head lama of Hemis, passed by and he saw two lions standing outside the *imambara*, drinking the water of the river so as to prevent it from entering the shrine. From then on, Hasan says, every year the lamas of Hemis sent tea, incense and oil as presents for the *imambara* 'as a token of respect'. This practice, Hasan claims, carried on till 1989, when the LBA enforced the boycott of the Muslims. In the past, he tells me, the local Buddhists would participate, generally as spectators, in the mourning rituals for Imam Husain at the *imambara*, but after 1989 this has sharply declined. However, local Buddhist government officials are still invited and some of them do attend.

Hasan is reluctant to speak about the boycott, and tells me that relations between Buddhists and Muslims are now almost 'normal'. Most of Hasan's friends are Buddhists. In fact, his mother's side is partly Buddhist, and his Buddhist relatives often visit his home. Likewise, on festive occasions his family visit their Buddhist relatives, and on these occasions the latter make special arrangements for food to be prepared for them by a Muslim cook. Hasan tells me that he eats food cooked by non-Muslims when he travels out of Ladakh, but he pleads with me not to reveal this to anyone.

Hasan takes me with him to his home, and shows me his impressive collection of books. He hands me a set of issues of the *Ladags Melong*, Ladakh's only English-language magazine, and explains that the magazine is a 'secular voice'. Its editor, Sonam Wangchuk, is a Buddhist, and its two sub-editors, Muhammad Hasnain and Rebecca Norman, are probably, as their names suggest, a Muslim and a Christian respectively.

I skim through the issues of the magazine that Hasan hands me. Most of them deal with local development problems. There are some that deal with the question of Buddhist-Muslim relations, and I make a quick note of these in my diary. One issue of the magazine highlights the Dalai Lama's recent visit to mosques in Nubra and his public lectures, attended by Muslims and Buddhists, where he stressed the importance of communal harmony. Another issue carries an extensive interview with the late Kushok Bakula, a revered Buddhist monk and political leader, who is quoted as appealing to the Ladakhis 'to be vigilant all the time of forces that seek to divide the Ladakhis in the name of religion and region'. 'Buddhists and Muslims', he says, 'must remain united and maintain their traditional harmony'. A third issue contains a report of a peace rally jointly taken out by Buddhist and Muslim organisations in Leh to pressurise the Indian and Pakistani governments to defuse the tension along the border and to resolve the Kashmir conflict through dialogue. Interestingly, several issues of the 'Religion' page of the magazine carry selections from the Ladakhi translation of selected verses of the Qur'an that has been jointly undertaken by a local *maulvi* and a lama.

It is now time for the evening prayer, and as Hasan steps out to complete his ablutions I make way to the main road, three miles away, to get back to Leh.



R introduces himself as a 'Balti, but with a difference'. I think he is bragging, but as we talk I realise that he is right. He is certainly the dissenter that he claims to be. He tells me that he is a committed Shi'a but that he has 'no faith' in most of the local Shi'a '*ulama*, whom he accuses of having a vested interest in preserving the backwardness of the Baltis. 'They talk only about heaven and hell and nothing about the problems of the real world', he complains. 'Till recently they even used to insist that studying English and Hindi or taking up government jobs would lead us to abandon our religion', he says, adding that now this opposition is not so vocal 'because they know that no one will listen to them if they talk such nonsense'.

The Baltis in Kargil are even more 'backward' than their cousins in Leh, R claims, one factor being that the Shi'a '*ulama* there have a 'stranglehold' over the community. Many Baltis, he says, continue to 'blindly follow' the '*ulama*, who claim authority on the basis of their

supposed superior understanding of Islam. Often, he says, particularly in Kargil, the *'ulama* are used by different political parties to deliver votes to them, for which service some *'ulama* often receive money. This is one major reason why, he argues, Balti-dominated Kargil is 'almost thirty years behind Leh'. However, he tells me, things are gradually changing. Several Shi'a *'ulama* of the younger generation now urge Baltis to go in for modern education at the same time as they stress the importance of Islamic learning

In recent years, R says, a growing number of Balti students have been travelling to other states in India or to Iran to study at *madrasas* there. The sort of education they receive there is said to be sternly literalist and, in most cases, does not include any 'relevant' 'modern' subjects. This, he claims, 'makes some of them even more rigid and inflexible in some ways'. 'They think that they are authorities in matters of religion just because they have studied in Uttar Pradesh or Delhi or Iran', he complains. Often, they use their new-found authority to collect money from local people in the name of religion. Some of them, or so R alleges, also try to use their contacts with the Iranians to get money for themselves from abroad, 'wrongly' claiming that they would use it for the welfare of the local Shi'as. 'In fact', R tells me, 'almost no Shi'a *'ulama* is doing any public service at all. Most of them are just using religion as a lucrative source of livelihood'. 'The *'ulama* seem least interested in any sort of community uplift work', he says, noting that there is not a single Shi'a *madrasa* in the whole Leh district. 'They keep fighting among themselves, supporting one political party or another, one leader in Iran against another one, thereby dividing the community as well'.

We talk about mutual perceptions of each other of Muslims and Buddhists. R thinks that Buddhists are, on the whole, 'gentle, helpful and peace-loving people', and that is why, he thinks, they are economically considerably better off than the Baltis. Most of his friends are Buddhists. In contrast, he says, 'Muslims keep fighting, with others or among themselves', because of which they remain 'backward and ignorant'. Buddhists, he says, as a rule do not 'condemn other religions', but Muslims 'routinely do so'.

I ask R about the Balti refusal to eat food cooked by non-Buddhists. He sniggers and tells me that he regularly eats at his Buddhist relatives' homes, but has to keep this a secret. In fact, he says, despite the seeming consensus of the local Shi'a *'ulama* that this is *haram* or forbidden,



many educated Balti youth do surreptitiously eat food cooked by non-Muslims. He tells me that the Balti practice of ‘untouchability’ is probably nowhere else observed in the Shi‘a world to the same extent. ‘I’ve been to Lucknow and Hyderabad, where there are many Shi‘as, many of who willingly eat Hindu food’, he says. He knows, he claims, of some Shi‘a ‘*ulama* outside Ladakh who have declared it permissible to eat food cooked by non-Muslims, but says that their views are almost unheard of in Ladakh.

R thinks that the interpretation that the Baltis give of a Qur’anic verse to justify their stance is ‘ridiculous’ and simply a means to promote ‘barriers’ between them and the Buddhists. He claims it is ‘an invention’ of some ‘*ulama* who ‘want to strengthen their own hold on the community’. ‘If their interpretation were right’, he argues, ‘why would the Qur’an allow for Muslims to eat food cooked by Jews and Christians?’. ‘How’, he asks, ‘would the Prophet have allowed a group of Christians to pray in the mosque in Medina if he thought them to be physically polluting? How would he have consented to an invitation by a Jew to join him for a meal, although the food was poisoned? How would Islam have spread throughout if Muslims considered others as polluted and stayed away from them?’.

R tells me that he sometimes raises these questions with the local Shi‘a ‘*ulama*, but they counter his argument by claiming that while the Qur’an allows for Muslims to eat the food of adherents of ‘heavenly religions’ like Christianity, it does not give the same permission in the case of ‘idol worshippers’, among whom they include the Buddhists. ‘You just cannot argue with these obstinate and hard-hearted people’, R says in despair. He refers to an uncle of his who insists that ‘A pig and a *kafir* can never be clean, no matter how much you wash them’. He tells me of a certain Balti leader in Kargil who, on the eve of a local election, told his followers that they were not to vote for a Buddhist candidate on the grounds that, as he put it, ‘*Kafirs* are to be demeaned, not to be elected as leaders’. The leader then went on to allegedly tell his flock, ‘*Kafirs* are so unclean that if a drop of water touched by them touches you, you must take a bath, so how can you ever think of voting for a Buddhist?’ ‘How ridiculous this is!’ R exclaims as he relates this story and as I try to conceal my horror.

The Qur’anic verse that most Baltis refer to when they defend their practice of abstaining from Buddhist-cooked food, R informs me, is

contained in a chapter of the Qu'ran titled *at-Tauba* ('The Repentance') (9:28). The verse reads as follows:

O ye who believe! Truly the Pagans are unclean; so let them not, after this year of theirs, approach the Sacred Mosque. And if ye fear poverty, soon will Allah enrich you, if He wills, out of His bounty, for Allah is All-knowing, All-wise.

Most Baltis, of course, do not understand Arabic, and so rely on their '*ulama* to explain the scripture to them. For their part, R says, the '*ulama* take the verse 'completely out of context'. A close reading of the preceding verses appears to suggest, R says, that the 'pagans' referred to here are those who 'forcibly sought to suppress Islam and the mission of the Prophet', taking up arms against him and his followers. It is thus probably not addressed to all non-Muslims as such, including those, like the Buddhists, who are not violently opposed to the Muslims. In any case, R points out, the verse refers to a ban on entry into the 'Sacred Mosque', probably the Ka'aba in Mecca, and does not speak about food at all.

R carries on with his harangue against many '*ulama*, whom, he says, 'say bad things' about other religions. R says he believes in Islam, but adds that 'there are good things in every religion'. He has a number of Buddhist lama friends, from whom he has learnt a considerable deal about Buddhism. He has read several Buddhist texts, and tells me that there are several things in common between Buddhism and Islam, which, however, many Muslims are either unaware of or do not appreciate. As a rule, Muslims, he says, think that Buddhists are 'idolators', but, in actual fact, the Buddha condemned the worship of idols. R thinks that the widespread custom of constructing and worshipping idols in Buddhist monasteries is a later development. Likewise, he says, many Muslims believe that Buddhists do not believe in God. This, he claims, is not, in fact, true. Admittedly, he says, the Buddha did not talk about God, but he did not deny His existence either. He approvingly cites the story of the Buddha's disciple who asked him why he did not talk of God. The Buddha replied to him with a parable. If a deer is shot by an arrow, one's first task is to remove the arrow rather than searching for the person who shot it. Likewise, our principal task in this world is to remove suffering, not to squabble about theological niceties.

Although he reserves most of his ire for the *'ulama*, R is also critical of many lamas. Some of them, he says, just live off the faith of the credulous. They spend their entire lives in prayer and rituals and are not involved in 'doing anything concrete to change people's lives'. Like any Shi'a *'ulama*, he says, most of them are not interested in learning about other faiths, believing firmly that theirs' alone is the way to salvation. In recent years, R tells me, the lamas have become 'more politicised'. Many lamas are now associated with the Ladakh Buddhist Association, which is said to have 'Hindutva leanings'. R expresses the fear of the possibility of the Hindu rightwing making inroads into Ladakh by trying to woo the Buddhists, including sections of the lamas, and set them against the Muslims.

As a minority, R says, the Muslims must go 'out of their way' to seek to build better relations with Buddhists. The *'ulama* have a major role to play in this, he argues, but he laments that they are not doing much in this regard. He talks of how communal prejudices are deeply rooted among both Muslims and Buddhists, and of how what he refers to as 'narrow-minded' *'ulama* and lamas actually only further reinforce these prejudices. He does mention, however, that some local Shi'a *'ulama* supported the Iranian government when it offered to pay the Taliban a sizeable sum of money if it refrained from destroying the Bamiyan Buddhas. This stance of the Iranians was widely appreciated by many Ladakhi Buddhists, he tells me.

R insists that the future of his fellow Shi'as lies with India. That, he says, is a point that even the Shi'a *'ulama* stress. The *'ulama* say, he tells me, that they will never declare a *fatwa* of *jihād* against India unless the *mujtahids*, leading Islamic scholars, in Iran tell them to do so, but the *mujtahids* have apparently told them, so he says, that the Shi'as should be loyal to India. R tells me that Pakistan-controlled Baltistan remains poor and undeveloped, and that 'no Indian Balti in his right mind would like to migrate there'. Baltistan, he alleges, and is 'now being flooded by Taliban-type radical Sunnis' as part of what he calls a 'plot to reduce the Shi'as there into a minority'. He expresses his concern with certain Sunni groups in Kashmir, who might not preach anti-Shi'a hatred openly but are convinced that the Shi'as are heretics. 'If they had their way they would declare Shi'as as non-Muslims, just as they have done to the Qadianis in Pakistan', he warns.

R talks me about the oppression of the Shi'as in Pakistan, something that most Shi'as in Ladakh readily do. He refers to the gunning down

of Shi‘a worshippers in mosques and *imambaras* there. ‘Thank heavens’, he exclaims, ‘such things don’t happen in Ladakh, where the Buddhists are generally very peace-loving’. ‘The only reason why there’s been no Shi‘a-Sunni conflict here’, he claims, ‘is because the Buddhists are a majority and both the Sunnis and the Shi‘as feel marginalised and so are forced to keep up a face of unity’. He talks of what he sees as the considerable differences between the Shi‘as and Sunnis, which both, being minorities in Leh, do not like referring to. Some Sunnis actually think that the Shi‘as are *kafirs*, although they do not generally openly say this.

‘Frankly’, R says to me, ‘only God knows who is right, the Shi‘as or the Sunnis or even the Buddhists. As far as I am concerned it makes little difference what your religion is if it does not make you a better human being’.



Shaikh Mirza is, clearly, the most sensible and level-headed Shi‘a ‘*alim* I’ve met in all Ladakh. He comes from a family that has produced numerous scholars – his own father was the imam of the main Shi‘a mosque in Leh. After spending more than a decade studying with various Shi‘a scholars in Najaf, Iraq, Shaikh Mirza returned to Leh, taking up employment as an Arabic teacher in a government school. He is retired now, but keeps himself busy with various projects, not least as the imam of the principal Shi‘a mosque.

As we walk through the narrow lanes of the Shi‘a locality Shaikh Mirza tells me about himself. He has three children, including a daughter who is doing her Master’s degree in Jammu University. He sees no problem in girls studying along with boys, he explains. ‘Narrow-minded *mullahs* will put up all sorts of objections to prevent people progressing’, he says with a shrug. He tells me, to my surprise, that the Imamia Model School, the only Shi‘a-run school in Leh, has a majority of girls on its rolls, and that they study in the same classrooms as the boys. Some conservative Baltis rave and rant against this, but Shaikh Mirza is insistent that girls’ education is perhaps more important than boys’. To educate a girl is to educate the entire family, he says.

Shaikh Mirza is himself an ‘*alim*, but he is impatient with many local Shi‘a ‘*ulama*, whom, he says, ‘have little knowledge of the contemporary world’. Their knowledge, so he claims, is ‘restricted

simply to the religious texts', and 'they do not know how to apply these in today's context'. Islam, he stresses, is not simply the bundle of rituals that some '*ulama* seem to have reduced it to. 'Islam teaches us to move along with the times, not to reject modernity altogether', he explains. He talks about Kargil and the notorious infighting among the Shi'a '*ulama* there, often on party lines, with rival groups supporting rival political parties. 'A Balti saying has it that there can't be two Gods because otherwise there will be global war, two wives cannot live peacefully in the same house; two beggars cannot live in the same lane; and two *mullahs* cannot live in the same locality without squabbling with each other', he says in jest. 'Broadmindedness', Shaikh Mirza tells me, 'is a gift from God, whom He gives to whom He wills. It cannot be simply learnt in a *madrassa*'.

The conversation veers to the topic of Buddhist-Muslim relations in Leh, and we talk about the boycott and its aftermath. Shaikh Mirza insists on the need for improving relations with the Buddhists, and says that Islam positively encourages its followers to live in peace with others. *Jihad*, in the sense of physical warfare, is allowed only when one's religion or life is under threat, he points out. In Ladakh, he says, the Muslims enjoy freedom of religion, and so talk of *jihad* against India is 'absurd'. He dismisses the notion that Muslims must perpetually be at war with others to expand the boundaries of the 'abode of Islam' (*dar ul-islam*) as 'un-Islamic', a later accretion after the time after the Prophet when the Sunni Umayyad and later Abbasid Caliphs sought to justify their expansionist designs. If some Muslims still cling to that belief, he says, it is because 'today everyone claims the right to issue *fatwas*'. He insists that this right is meant only for the qualified '*ulama* alone, or else, as the happenings in large parts of the world today prove, it can be 'misused by people to promote their own narrow interests and promote conflict'.

Shaikh Mirza strikes me as remarkably open-minded, and I am emboldened to ask him what I think is a provocative question. In strictly legal terms, according to the *shari'ah*, I say, many Muslim '*ulama* would not consider the Buddhists as *ahl-i kitab*, or 'people of the book' (such as Jews and Christians), who enjoy the status of 'protected subjects' (*dhimmis*) in an Islamic state. Some Muslim scholars provide only two choices for non-*ahl-i kitab*: death or conversion to Islam. Shaikh Mirza vehemently disagrees with the latter point. Even if the Buddhists do not believe in God, Muslims must learn to live with them

in peace, he insists. ‘God has given life to even animals, so how can we kill someone just because he isn’t a Muslim?’ he asks. To consider all Buddhists, or all non-Muslims for that matter, as ‘enemies of Islam’ is, he says, ‘completely wrong’ because ‘there are good people in every community’. If all non-Muslims were, as some Muslims think, by definition ‘enemies’, he asks me, why did the Prophet Muhammad invite Christians to pray in his mosque in Medina? To further stress his point he tells me the well-known story of a Jewish woman who would daily insult the Prophet and throw rubbish on him as he passed by. The Prophet tolerated this silently. One day, it so happened that she was absent, and the Prophet, thinking that she might be sick, went to inquire about her health, and this so touched the woman that she became a Muslim. ‘We need to draw a lesson from this and this is how we must behave with others’, Shaikh Mirza says.

I ask Shaikh Mirza what he feels about the general Balti refusal to eat food cooked by Buddhists. He is somewhat hesitant to commit himself to any position, but he informs me that there is no consensus on the issue among the Shi‘a *‘ulama*. I then tell him about a Shi‘a Shaikh I had met the day before who insisted that while conditions in India for the Shi‘as are better than in Pakistan, the Ladakhi Shi‘as have been, so he put it, ‘enslaved’ by the Buddhists. As ‘proof’ of this claim he mentioned the fact that, out of respect for Buddhist sensibilities, fishing in the Indus river is prohibited, meat cannot be sold on some Buddhist holy days, and cigarette smoking is illegal in buses. With regard to the last point he claimed that it was ‘clearly anti-Muslim’, because the ban had not been extended to drinking alcohol in buses as well. Shaikh Mirza, who knows the other Shaikh well, laughs, somewhat in scorn, when I relate the story. ‘Next time the Shaikh will claim that Muslims are being discriminated against in Leh because plastic bags have been banned here!’, he exclaims, not concealing his disgust.

‘Since we live in a multi-religious society, we all must learn to compromise otherwise we simply cannot co-exist’, Shaikh Mirza urges. He goes on to tell me about his own involvement in local efforts to promote Buddhist-Muslim dialogue. He is often invited by Buddhist groups to speak on the occasion of the Buddha’s birthday, where, he says, he sometimes speaks on Buddhism and Islam and points out some of their similarities. He also participates, as a member of the local chapter of the International Association for Religious Freedom, in meetings with Buddhist lamas and scholars that generally have to do

with communal harmony. But more than this, he says, is what he calls the unique Ladakhi form of inter-community dialogue: through intermarriage. He offers his own example to stress the point. His wife's mother is a Buddhist, and his wife and her Buddhist half-sister are inseparable friends, visiting each other almost every second day.

Every religion, Shaikh Mirza says, 'has some good points'. There is nothing in Islam to prevent a Muslim from appreciating the good things in other religions. Since Muslims are supposed to believe that all the various prophets of God taught the same primal religion (*din*), they must willingly accept the good points in other faiths as well. Shaikh Mirza cites a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: A word of wisdom is the lost property of the believer, and wherever he finds it he can pick it up. That being the case, he says, one can genuinely appreciate the truths contained in other religions, while still being a proper Muslim. He tells me that he, for one, considers the Dalai Lama to be a remarkable man and that he deeply respects him. He recounts the reception that he, along with other local Muslim leaders, once gave to the Dalai Lama on his visit to Leh. The Dalai Lama apparently told the Buddhists present at the meeting that they must consider the Muslim minority to be in their care and protection and must ensure that no harm befalls them. 'Only a sincerely spiritual person could have spoken like this', Shaikh Mirza thoughtfully says. 'If only there were more people like him in the world it would be a much happier place'.

Shaikh Mirza takes me down to the Imamia Model School, the only Shi'a school of its sort in Leh. It is time for the tea-break, and young boys, smartly dressed in grey trousers and green blazers, and girls neatly turned out in *shalwar-kameez*, rush out into the courtyard shouting in glee. Some of them come out to greet Shaikh Mirza, who happens to be one of the founders of the school. He speaks with them for a while, asking them about their studies, and then leads me up a flight of stairs to meet the principal, who, it turns out to my surprise, is a Kashmiri Pandit woman. All but one of the four principals the school has had so far, Shaikh Mirza tells me, have been non-Muslims: two Hindus and a Buddhist. 'Some people say that having a non-Muslim principal might lead the children astray from Islam, but this is not true', he says. 'We are interested in good education for our children, and will take it from whoever is capable. What is the use of having an ignorant principal even if he is a fellow Muslim?'

Shaikh Mirza steps out to meet a teacher while I sit in the office of Shameeta Pandit, the principal of the school. She sports a large *bindi* on her forehead and a golden pendant shaped in the Hindu sacred figure of 'Om' dangles from her neck. Her family, she says, is from Baramulla in Kashmir, and, like most other Kashmiri Pandits, they were forced to flee and now most of her relatives live in Jammu. She feels 'quite comfortable', as she puts it, working in a Muslim institution, and claims that the Ladakhi Muslims are 'very different' and 'more open' than their co-religionists in the Kashmir Valley. Most of the students in the school, are, of course, Shi'as, but there are, she tells me, a small number of Sunni, Buddhist and even Hindu students on its rolls. Likewise, most of the 16 teachers in the school are Buddhists and Hindus. She tells me that the Balti practice of refusing food cooked by non-Muslims is 'intriguing' since in Kashmir the Muslims readily eat in Pandits' homes, but she says that the practice is hardly unique. After all, she reminds me, many Pandits continue to practice varying forms of 'untouchability' towards Muslims. 'I guess it takes all sorts to make the world', she says thoughtfully.

After the noon prayers get over, Shaikh Mirza returns and takes me on a round of the school. Slogans painted across the neatly whitewashed walls announce piously formulated instructions: 'We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together'; 'Read the Qur'an and you will find Allah wants you to be kind'; 'Happiness is a wondrous commodity—the more you give the more you have'; 'Education is discipline for the adventure of life'. Framed pictures of Gandhi, Muhammad Iqbal and Maulana Azad grace the walls. It is, in short, just like any other school in town. But Shaikh Mirza has reason to be proud, because, as he explains, the school has excelled in a range of fields. He points to a dozen or more shields and cups that grace a large shelf in the visitors' room, placed between photographs of the Dalai Lama and the Ayatollah Khomeini. Several of these were won by students of the school in competitions organised by the local administration, for sports, essay-writing competitions and the march-past on Republic Day. The school's results in the board examinations have also been equally impressive, I am told.

As he takes me around Shaikh Mirza provides me a brief history of the school. The Baltis were, and still are, the least educated community in Leh, he informs me. 'Our religious leaders are, in part, to blame for this', he says. The traditional '*ulama* did not recognise the value of



modern education. Some of them genuinely feared it would lead to irreligion, while others thought simply that it would undermine their own authority. Not surprisingly, then, when Shaikh Mirza and his colleagues set up the school there was considerable opposition from the conservatives. Undeterred, the team carried on with their mission, helped, he says, by the local administration and a Christian woman from Britain, who provided the school with a generous grant. Today, he tells me, the local '*ulama* have come to appreciate the work of the school and the importance of modern education, but Shaikh Mirza laments the fact that most of them are simply not interested in doing anything to promote it themselves. For many '*ulama*, he says impatiently, religion is limited to the four walls of the mosque.

Shaikh Mirza insists that I join him for tea at his home. We settle on thick Persian-style carpets on the floor of his living room, snuggling up to an enormous samovar that bubbles on a wooden stove as he excitedly tells me about his plans for the community. He hands me a chart that describes the new *imambara* that he and his colleagues in the Anjuman-i Imamia, the local Shi'a community organisation, are setting up in Leh. In contrast to traditional *imambaras*, this one will have a library ('We want to stock books on science and contemporary affairs and on other religions besides Islam as well', he says), an office that will serve as a community centre and a set of guest rooms. He also tells me about the As-Zahra Centre that he has helped set up in Leh. The only Balti women's organisation in Leh, the Centre provides training in crafts and embroidery work to Balti women from poor families and also arranges to sell their products.

All this, Shaikh Mirza tells me, is inspired by his and his colleagues' commitment to their faith. 'Religion must also be understood in terms of social concern', he says as he leads me to the door and bids me farewell.



Abdul Ghani Sheikh is probably one of Ladakh's most well-known writers. A retired Indian Information Service officer, he has authored numerous books, including short stories in Ladakhi and Urdu, and some of his writings have been translated into English as well. He is an Argon community leader and commands considerable respect among the Buddhists and Baltis of Ladakh as well.

Sheikh tells me that the boycott had an indelible impact on Buddhist-Muslim relations, the scars of which still remain today. During the boycott, he says, several Muslims living in far-flung villages in scattered groups had to leave their homes for Leh, where they were granted plots to settle down. A number of Muslim houses were burnt, and a few cases of conversions by Muslims to Buddhism, out of compulsion rather than choice, were also reported, but these Muslims, he adds, were in any case just 'nominal', already heavily influenced by Buddhism. He points out that the attacks were mainly directed against the Argons, not the Baltis, although both were subjected to the boycott. This he attributes to the fact that many Buddhists saw the Argons as their principle enemy, and also because they might have been wary that attacks on the Baltis might lead to similar attacks by Baltis in nearby Kargil against the Buddhist minority living there. At the same time, Sheikh reveals that despite the boycott many Muslims and Buddhists helped each other secretly, especially families that were related to each other through marriage.

Today, Sheikh says, Buddhist-Muslim relations have considerably improved. 'Ordinary Buddhists are very good people', he stresses, laying the blame for boycott on local politicians who have a vested interest in promoting what he sees as 'baseless fears' about the local Muslims being sympathisers of the Kashmiri militants. He speaks about the work that he, along with several other Muslim and Buddhist leaders, has been engaged in to promote better inter-community relations, referring to the activities of the International Association for Religious Freedom, of which he is a member, in bringing Muslims and Buddhists to sort their problems out through dialogue. He also talks about the role of the Dalai Lama, who visits Ladakh often, and whom the Muslims also greatly respect. 'When the Dalai Lama heard about the boycott, he refused to step foot inside Ladakh till the LBA lifted it', Sheikh says. 'Whenever he comes here', he adds, 'he stresses the need for communal harmony and that has a very positive impact on the Buddhists as well as the Muslims'. Not many Ladakhi Buddhists, Sheikh says, heeded the Dalai Lama's appeal to stop the boycott, but the resident Tibetan refugee community did so, and they remained neutral throughout the period of the boycott. For this, they are said to have been heavily criticised by some Ladakhi Buddhists, and there was even talk for a while in some quarters of extending the boycott to them as well.

Religious leaders have a very crucial role to play in promoting dialogue, Sheikh underlines. He tells me how when the Taliban destroyed the Buddha statues in Bamiyan, some Ladakhi Muslim ‘*ulama* condemned it, and several Muslims joined Buddhists in a demonstration through the streets of Leh. Likewise, when America attacked Afghanistan, a widely respected Ladakhi Buddhist lama is said to have offered special prayers for the suffering Afghans.

Sheikh hands me a set of some of his writings. Most of them have to do with the history of the Argons. A few deal specifically with interfaith issues. One of these is a report of the proceedings of an interfaith conference organised by the Sunni Anjuman Moin ul-Islam in Leh. It refers to prominent Buddhist and Muslim leaders stressing the need for communal harmony. The Director of the Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre is quoted as arguing that all religions teach peace and harmony; Shaikh Mirza, a Balti Shi‘a scholar is mentioned as having stated that Islam teaches peace and affirms that diversity is part of God’s plan; the Sunni Maulvi Abdul Qayyum Nadvi quotes the Qur’an to stress the point that everyone should be free to choose his or her own religion; Togdan Rinpoche, head lama of the Phyang *gonpa* calls for the separation of religion from politics, arguing that conflating the two generally leads to communal conflict; and Tsultim Gyatso of the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies presents the Dalai Lama as a sort of role model to emulate, stressing that he is revered by both the Buddhists as well as the Muslims of Ladakh.

‘Meetings and statements like these’, Shaikh says after I finish reading the report, ‘may be small, symbolic things but they can have a powerful influence on people’s thinking’.



Maulvi Muhammad ‘Umar Nadvi is the Imam of the Sunni Jami‘a Masjid in Leh. As his title suggests, he is a graduate of the Nadwat ul-‘Ulama *madrasa* in Lucknow, one of the most well-known centres of Sunni Islamic learning in India. He also holds a degree from Kashmir University and works as the principal of the government middle school in the largely Buddhist village of Saboo, near Leh.

Nadvi sees himself not simply as a religious functionary but also as a community activist. Indeed, he is one of the major spokesmen of the Sunni community in Leh, and is involved in various community-related

activities. He tells me, for instance, about his work with a voluntary agency LASH (Ladakh Action for Smoking and Health), which conducts anti-smoking awareness camps across Ladakh. He has also served on the board of the Students Educational Cultural Movement of Ladakh, a multi-religious organisation that focuses on educational issues. He is a senior office-bearer of the Anjuman Moin ul-Islam, a local Sunni community organisation, which, among other activities, arranges to collect *zakat* money for widows and scholarships for poor students. In the village of Saboo, where he teaches, he works with his students, Buddhists and Muslims, to promote awareness about the hazards of drinking. 'The Buddhists of the village respect me', he says. He tells me about how an Indian army officer once offered him some money for the local *madrassa*, but how he, instead, chose to use the money to build a glass room in the school to keep the children warm in the winter.

This message of social involvement, Nadvi tells me, is something that he also preaches from the pulpit of the mosque. In his Friday sermons, he says, he often focuses on social issues. 'Just last week', he tells me, 'I spoke about the need to save electricity, to go in for modern education and to support the efforts of the local administration'. He admits that, often, Friday sermons in mosques are 'obsessed with rituals', and are 'not life-related', and insists that this has to change.

'I don't want to talk about the past', Nadvi tells me when I ask him about the boycott and its impact on Buddhist-Muslim relations. 'I am concerned about the future, about peace and how to rebuild our relations'. Despite his various commitments he does take this task with particular seriousness. He tells me that he sometimes speaks on the local radio station on peace and development issues, in which he quotes from both Islamic as well as Buddhist scriptures to make his point. He recently organised a function to celebrate Eid, to which he invited several Buddhist lamas, political leaders and government officials were. Some years ago he organised a seminar devoted to discussion of the role of religion in peace-building. Recently, he, along with some important Buddhist leaders at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, arranged a large interfaith dialogue meeting, which culminated in a public march by local Muslim, Christian and Buddhist leaders through the streets of Leh, stopping at mosques, churches and monasteries on the way.

Nadvi admits that despite these and other such efforts to promote better relations between Buddhists and Muslims, mistrust remains, particularly among the youth. 'Many young Muslims and Buddhists have wrong views about each other, but such extremism cannot last long', he tells me. He is bitterly critical of radical Islamists who denounce other communities as 'enemies of God'. 'The Qur'an', he argues, 'tells us not to harm anyone, not to abuse others' religions or hurt their sentiments. It tells us that everyone is free to believe what he or she wants to'. 'My solution to the communal problem', he tells me half-jokingly, 'is that the extremists from all communities should be locked up together in jail. There they will be forced to communicate together, break down their barriers and come to the realisation that all of us are basically the same'.

'Buddhists and Muslims need to learn about each other's religions', Nadvi stresses, adding that this is essential in order to remove misunderstandings and to promote mutual respect. However, he admits, ignorance about other faiths abounds among both communities. Hardly any Islamic literature is available in the Ladakhi language, and writings on Buddhism in Urdu are rare to come by. The problem, Nadvi says, is further compounded by the fact that many Muslims believe that to learn the Tibetan script, in which Ladakhi is written, is almost tantamount to becoming Buddhist. Likewise, many Buddhists are reluctant to learn Urdu, which they see as somehow a 'Muslim' language. Nadvi insists that such arguments are, as he puts it, 'silly'. The different languages, he tells me, are all 'signs of God'. He himself has learnt the Tibetan script, being probably one of the few '*ulama* in Ladakh to have done so, and is now working with a lama, Geylong Phande of the Phyang monastery, to translate the Qur'an into Ladakhi.

One of the several community projects that Nadvi is involved in is the newly established Madrasa 'Ulum ul-Qur'an at the village of Thiksey, not far from Leh. Established in 1997, it is the only Sunni *madrasa* in the whole of the Leh district. Only a few of the eighteen children in the *madrasa* are locals, most of them hailing from far-flung areas of Ladakh, including Kargil, Zaskar, Nubra and Dras. Almost all of them are from poor families, and there is not a single child from Leh town, where most Sunnis are fairly prosperous. As elsewhere in India, *madrasa* education, here, too, is now associated largely with the poor.

The curriculum of the *madrasa* is an adaptation of that used in the Nadwat ul-'Ulama, Lucknow, where most of the leading Ladakhi Sunni

'*ulama* have graduated from. The focus is on the Qur'an and the Hadith, the traditions attributed to the Prophet, *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, and Arabic, although basic English and Mathematics are also said to be taught. The medium of instruction is Urdu. No arrangement is made for the teaching of local history, Buddhism or the Ladakhi language.

The *madrasa* has two teachers, both of whom are from Uttar Pradesh. Neither of them, they admit, has ever had a conversation with a lama. Nor, they say, do they have any knowledge of Buddhism. One of them, however, has visited a monastery. I ask them if they do not think it important to interact with the lamas, because most of the villagers are Buddhists. 'Yes', they somewhat hesitatingly agree, but they complain that the work in the *madrasa* gives them little free time. The village also has a sizeable Shi'a population, and only one of the teachers, the one who has met a lama, has met with the local Shi'a *shaikh*, and that too only briefly.

I raise this issue with Nadvi, who readily agrees with my point that interaction between religious leaders of the different communities is crucial. 'I am afraid', he says, somewhat despairingly, 'things will take a long time to change'.



Ahmad works in a travel agency in Leh. His father is an Argon and his mother is a Buddhist. A college graduate, he is associated with the Tablighi Jama'at, a reformist Sunni movement which has a small presence in Ladakh.

Buddhist-Muslim relations in Ladakh, Ahmad says, are gradually returning to normalcy, although the effects of the boycott can still be felt. He attributes the boycott to the fact that the Buddhists felt that the Argons and the Kashmiri Sunnis controlled the local economy. This was naturally resented by an emerging generation of modern educated Buddhists. To add to this was the widespread feeling among the Buddhists that the Argons, and, to a lesser, extent, the Baltis, were opposed to the Buddhist demand for autonomy for Ladakh, which, they feared, would lead to Buddhist domination in the region.

Further complicating the situation was the fact of fairly frequent inter-marriages between the fact that several Buddhist women were marrying Muslim men. This was not a new development, however,

since intermarriage had been occurring for centuries. One reason for this, Ahmad informs me, was that traditionally polyandry was widely practised among the Buddhists, which meant that many of their women were left unmarried. Some of these became *chomos*, female lamas, while several others married Kashmiri men.

Ahmad tells me that although many Baltis might deny it, the fact that they do not eat food cooked by the Buddhists is greatly resented by many Buddhists, particularly the youth. A common argument put forward by the Baltis for this, he says, is that since the consumption of liquor and the eating of the meat of dead animals are forbidden in Islam they cannot eat food cooked by the Buddhists, many of whom consume liquor and carrion. Behind this argument, however, he says, is the general Balti belief that the Qur'an allegedly regards non-Muslims as 'impure'.

The Qur'anic verse that the Baltis use to justify this stance, Ahmad tells me, is interpreted differently by the Baltis and the Argons. The verse in question warns the Muslims that the 'unbelievers' are 'impure'. The Baltis take this to mean that all non-Muslims are both physically as well as spiritually impure, and hence refrain from eating food cooked by them. In contrast, the Argons, Ahmad explains, take the verse to refer simply to 'spiritual impurity', which allows them to eat non-Muslim food. Ahmad thinks that the Baltis use this verse simply to 'magnify differences between themselves and the Buddhists'. This, he says, is 'very wrong'. After all, he claims, 'Islam seeks to bridge differences between people and communities, not to create new ones'. It is particularly important for Muslim minorities to have good relations with the majority community where they live, he says, adding that the Balti practice of 'untouchability' is a major hurdle in promoting better relations between Buddhists and Muslims in Leh.

We talk about the changes that the Argon society are undergoing, particularly after the lifting of the boycott. He sees a growing cultural insularity taking place, with some younger Muslims now consciously seeking to distance themselves from what they see as Buddhist cultural influence. He points to the new structure of the Jami 'a mosque in Leh, which is decidedly 'Islamic', having taken the place of the older structure which was almost identical to a Buddhist monastery in its design and floral motifs. Many Muslims have given up traditional Ladakhi wedding ceremonies and local customary practices, many of

them Sufi inspired, such as reciting the *aurad* or litanies in the mosque. Ahmad sees this, in part, as a reaction to the suffering of the Muslims during the boycott. It is also a result of the gradual, almost imperceptible, spread of more scripturalist forms of Islam that are stressed by visiting missionaries of the Tablighi Jama'at and the local 'ulama, almost all of whom have been educated at *madrasas* in other parts of India.

There is a growing realisation among the Argons, Sheikh says, that they must now take to modern education. Earlier, the Argons were mostly traders, and so generally did not take much interest in higher education for their children. That, however, is changing now. The community has now set up its own high school, the Islamiya Public School, a co-educational institution which even has a few Balti and Buddhist students on its rolls. Besides this school and a similar one in the village of Thiksey, the Argons have few other institutions. Unlike the Buddhists, who have many non-governmental organisations, some of which are funded by donors in America and Western Europe, the Argons do not run any organisations for the welfare of the community. 'We are so badly organised', he laments, and exclaims, 'What is the use of all this talk about Islam and its glories when we are not interested in helping ourselves, leave alone others?'

Ahmad tells me about the efforts of local religious leaders in promoting better relations between the different communities. The Sunni Moin ul-Islam and the Shi'a Anjuman-i Imamia work together on common issues facing Muslims, he says. Shi'as invite Sunni scholars to address them on the occasion of Imam 'Ali's birthday, and the Sunnis reciprocate during the Eid celebrations. Sometimes, Muslim and Buddhist religious and political leaders attend each other's religious functions. At the same time, 'ordinary' Muslims and Buddhists enjoy fairly cordial relations. 'The situation is much better here than in most of India', Ahmad stresses. 'We've never had the sort of communal riots as in Gujarat, and God willing, never will'. He also tells me that few Argons support Kashmir's merger with Pakistan, fearing that their economic conditions would worsen if they sever their ties with India. 'We have to be pragmatic, in any case', he stresses, 'because under no circumstances would the Buddhists of Leh want to live with Pakistan and so we have to go along with them'. In the course of the Kargil war, he tells me, numerous Argons, in addition to Baltis, helped the Indian army, but he complains that this fact has not been highlighted by the media, which further reinforces what he says is the baseless myth of the Argons sympathising with the Kashmiri militants.



The Moravian Church in Leh is situated just off the road that passes through the town's main bazaar. Emblazoned on the entrance gate of the church is the Moravian's logo: a ram carrying a white flag with a red cross. The same emblem is found inside the church, and bears the revealing legend: 'The Lamb Has Conquered'. The church obviously labours under the firm conviction of Christianity being the only way to salvation, and of it being engaged in a cosmic battle with other faiths for global conquest. My hunch is confirmed when I see a set of evangelical booklets produced by the Every Home Crusade, Bangalore, kept on a shelf at the entrance of the church.

The neatly-kept and unassuming church is done up somewhat in local style. The wooden beams are decidedly Ladakhi, and chairs have been replaced by cushions laid out on the carpeted floor. The congregation is ethnically mixed, including Tamilians, Ladakhis, Nepalis, Biharis and a man who looks distinctly Kashmiri. Besides, there is a small number of white Europeans and Americans present. I later discover that one of these is a missionary, who has worked in a remote Buddhist village helping the villagers to harvest their fields with a thresher that he has provided. No doubt he has used this as an opportunity to tell the villagers about Christianity.

Elijah Gergen, the pastor of the Church, reads out a passage from an Urdu Bible. This is followed by recitations from the Tibetan and English Bible for the sake of the linguistically mixed group. The pastor then preaches his sermon, which consists of a homily about faith in Jesus. He is obviously convinced that Christ alone is the way to heaven. 'He who does not have a living relationship with Jesus', he declaims, 'is like a lost sheep'. He talks about general morality, love, compassion and so on, but insists that 'You can be saved only through Jesus'.

After the service gets over, I approach Gergen and I request him for an interview. We agree to meet the next day in his office at the Moravian Mission School, of which he is the principal. The school is said to be one of the best in all Ladakh, although in recent years the Christian monopoly of English-medium education has been challenged with the setting up of a number of similar institutions by Buddhist and Muslim organisations. Gergen is well suited for the post he occupies as head of the mission school – a former lecturer in genetics, he earned a degree in theology from a Christian seminary in Korea.

Gergen proudly tells me that he is a scientist and that he can defend Christianity on 'purely scientific grounds'. I try to play the devil's advocate and ask him for scientific proof for the Christian belief in the Incarnation and the Trinity. Gergen probably thinks I am being irreverent. He changes his stance all of a sudden and says, 'Science is relative truth, while Christ is the absolute truth'.

It comes as no surprise to me when Gergen confesses to believe in the singular, absolute truth of Christianity. Having been present during his sermon the day before, I am well prepared for this admission. He tells me, of course, that Christians must, in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, live in love, peace and harmony with others. That, however, he adds, does not mean that they should renege on what he sees as their fundamental missionary vocation. Since salvation can be had through Christ alone, he asserts, every Christian has the duty of conveying the message of Christianity to others.

Gergen tells me that he has attended numerous interfaith dialogue meetings in Leh, and that he does believe that the different communities in Ladakh must live together in peace with each other. At the same time he says that he vehemently disagrees with a certain approach to interfaith dialogue that seeks to deny the fundamental differences between religions, which leads to such efforts becoming what he calls 'a complete farce'. 'Simply by patting each other on the back and saying good things about each other's religions is not going to lead to these differences melting away'. In fact, Gergen is insistent that the differences are of seminal importance, because, as he sees them, 'they reflect very different truth claims'. 'I, as a Christian, believe', he explains, 'that Christianity is the only way to salvation. Hence, I cannot and must not deny the differences between Christianity and other religions just to please others'.

I ask him what he thinks about heaven and hell, and he tells me that they are real, physical places. The latter place is where non-Christians will suffer in hell for not having accepted Jesus. So the Bible says, Gergen retorts, when I ask him if he is serious. He defends Christian missionaries who explicitly claim the superiority of their faith. 'Every proclamation has an in-built rejection, so when someone proclaims his religion he is, at the same time rejecting the other religions', he impatiently announces as I try to interject. At the same time, and this comes somewhat as a relief to me, he reiterates his earlier point that

despite their differences Christians and others must live together in peace.

I am not surprised when Gergen tells me that some Buddhists are increasingly resentful of the Christian missionaries. I tell him the stories I have heard from Buddhist friends of European missionaries, disguised as 'tourists' and 'social workers', taking Buddhist children to Dehra Dun and Srinagar to 'educate' them but actually to bring them to Christ. Gergen admits that some missionaries might engage in this sort of what I call 'bribery', but insists that he himself is not involved and nor can he be held responsible for their actions. He tells me of a demonstration taken out by a group of Buddhists in Leh in 1987 against a book written by the then pastor of the church, Revered Hishey. The Buddhists were incensed at the contents of the book, whose back cover announced to prospective readers that if they had tried Buddhism and other religions and these had 'failed', they ought to try Jesus instead.

The lunch bell rings and Gergen leads me out of the school. In the lane leading to the main bazaar, a group of lamas sit outside the Jokhang temple sunning themselves. In the distance I can see Muslims with their white caps heading for the noon prayer at the mosque. I sit down at a teashop and scribble random thoughts on inter-community relations in Leh.

## Summing up and Recommendations

This general survey of perceptions of inter-community relations and alternate understandings of religion in Jammu and Kashmir points to the urgent need for promoting dialogue between members of different communities in the state. Efforts to reach a peaceful solution to the Kashmir conflict have, till now, focussed almost entirely on the political aspects of the issue. While this is crucial, given the salience of religion in shaping the discourses through which the conflict is expressed, promoting inter-faith dialogue and alternative, more inclusive understandings of religion through various civil society initiatives in the state is an urgent task.

Inter-faith dialogue initiatives in Jammu and Kashmir could take several forms, including interaction among religious heads through conferences and seminars or more informally, as well as joint participation of 'lay' people from different communities in common social projects. Alternate forms of religious literature need to be promoted that stress the importance of dialogue and communal harmony and that critique interpretations of religion that promote conflict and hatred. NGOs working in the region can include communal harmony and inter-faith dialogue as part of their activities. Visits to the region by religious leaders from other parts of India who are engaged in promoting communal harmony should be encouraged. The local media could be motivated to highlight alternate understandings of religion. The Universities of Kashmir and Jammu could play an important role in this regard, through sponsoring various academic and other programmes. State-level textbooks could incorporate stories or narratives that stress more inclusive perspectives on various religions. Finally, the armed forces as well as the local bureaucracy could be sensitised to appreciate the multiple ways in which religion is interpreted and thus avoid stereotyping any particular community, which can only prove to be counter-productive.