



National Identity and Regional Autonomy in South Asia: the case of Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

The problem of the precise territorial delimitation of South Asia has remained an abiding problem and has in many ways stymied the development of the region both as a geopolitical and a geo-economic entity. This is not surprising given the structural inheritance of the region, with all the sovereign states emerging from the womb of British colonial India. This political history of the sovereign states of the region often stokes cleavages between the regimes and its citizens, and is also an embedded source of inter-state tensions, with India as its perceived epicentre. The identity politics in the region that emanates from this often manifests itself in demands for regional autonomy. This essay advances the view that the tendency of various south Asian regimes to perceive demands for regional autonomy as a security threat rather than a natural expression of identity politics has led to repressive policies that has only brewed more simmering discontent and in extreme cases even secessionism.

Author Profile

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The South Asian Region:

Since the post-colonial territorial delimitations of the sovereign states in the South Asian region could not clinically separate all the diverse ethnic clusters of their composite coexistence that had existed for centuries in British and pre-British India, to hermetically seal them within the new states, meant that cross-border ethnic and cultural constituencies would be structurally endemic in South Asia. Most often these have been perceived as threats to the territorial integrity of the inadequately evolved states that emerged out of British colonial rule. The national security establishments in these states, built to replicate their counterparts in the west remain too mystified by the western conceptual traps of the Westphalian 'nation-state' to be adequately sensitive to this.

Consequently in most South Asian states, popular aspirations for regional autonomy are perceived by their respective national regimes to be in conflict with their imaginary idea of national identity and, when such aspirations are understandably reflected by shared cultural groups across the territorial borders, it foments inter-state tensions. The multiple sources of ascriptive identity in South Asia, which includes religion, language, ethnicity and many imaginary inspirations, provide infinite range of possible mobilisations of group-identities asserting their aspirations for regional autonomy. Moreover each group often does it from their specific experience, within the diversely deficient democratic structures of governance in their respective states. This is the sense in which the simultaneous struggle for national identity and regional autonomy in South Asia, as part of its post-colonial inheritance, and exacerbated by the global cold war directed against external threats, embeds the region with sources of both inter-state and intra-state tensions. The operational democratic deficits in all the legally sovereign states of the region reinforce this vicious circle.

The origin of almost all the major security concerns in the region are rooted in this macro-level historical inheritance of the struggle of group-identities, seeking to assert their diverse aspirations for autonomy, equality or self-respect based on their existential experience of deprivation, disadvantage and humiliation from real or/and perceived majoritarian excesses. India's unresolved problems in Kashmir; earlier identity conflicts around the Dravidian identity followed by the Telegu identity in Tamil Nadu and now around Telengana;¹ the issue of Sikh identity after the "Operation Bluestar" and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984² as also now, in the entire North-East ³, and vast areas of its tribal population and forest-dwellers in 220 of about 550

¹ Tamil Nadu in South India had one of the earliest independence movements (separatist or secessionist or liberation movements) in India even before the British left based on nationalism, ethnicity and language dating back to 1939. The Dravida Kazhagam (DK) of Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy and its offshoot Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) had as their primary goal an independent Dravida Nadu (southern India that included Tamil Nadu) separate from India. In 1963 the Congress Party Government of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru passed a constitutional amendment that prohibited parties and individuals demanding independence from contesting elections. The DMK thereafter abandoned the Dravida Nadu independence demand. For more on this see <http://www.tamiltribune.com/independence/index.html>, accessed December 1, 2010. The Telangana agitation though it dates back to 1969 has recently come into the limelight with a agitation being launched to create a separate Telangana state breaking away from the Southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The identity politics here are believed to be fuelled primarily by economic grievances vis-à-vis the coastal region of the state.

² The controversial Operation Bluestar was an operation launched by the Indian army at the behest of the elected civilian government in power at that time led by the Congress (I) and Indira Gandhi to free the Golden Temple- the holiest of Sikh shrines- from the clutches of militants who had taken over and virtually fortified the temple complex. The anti Sikh riots of 1984 in which thousands of Sikhs across the country were massacred, followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards.

³ India's north east is home to more than 50 ethnic rebel groups – a few demanding complete secession from India, others fighting for ethnic identities and homelands.

districts across the country are cases in point.⁴ Undivided Pakistan's problems in its eastern wing leading to the creation of Bangladesh, and now persisting in all its northern regions predominantly inhabited by Pathans and Baluchs; ⁵ Sri Lanka's problems in its Tamil-speaking northern region leading to the civil war; ⁶Bangladesh's problems with the Chakma hill tribes, and other Buddhists in the Chittagong Hill areas; ⁷ Nepal's Terai regional aspirations ⁸ are further examples. The origin of all these and many other festering sores in the region stoking internal and inter-state tensions in South Asia are rooted at the macro-level in the same source.

The resolutions of some of these problems, or their partial mitigation provide us with considerable empirical experience to help resolve some of the unresolved ones, among which the Kashmir issue obviously gets primary attention. It would be wiser for the regimes in this historically comparable region to learn from each others' mistakes than be condemned to repeating them.

However as in all such cases, for optimising the lessons of comparative politics, one has to be careful about two critical structural preconditions. First since no two historically different issues could be identical, one must ensure that comparisons at all levels are between comparables; secondly, one must clearly distinguish between the purely conjunctural and the causal. For example, the decisive military victory of the Sri Lankan armed forces over the LTTE ⁹ as an example of the permanent resolution of the Sri Lankan Tamil aspiration for regional autonomy could be as erroneous an example for resolving similar problems in the other states in South Asia, as the relevance of the so-called "KPS Gill Formula" of Punjab for the rest of India. ¹⁰

⁴ The current unrest in India in the tribal belts is not secessionist in nature but has manifested itself in the form of a violent movement that challenges the pattern of development being imposed in these areas. This has been described by the security establishment in India as one of the biggest internal security threats.

⁵ In Pakistan the eastern wing where identity politics coalesced around the emotive issue of language and culture finally seceded to form Bangladesh in 1971- currently unrest in Pakistan prevails in Balochistan between Baloch nationalists and the government of Pakistan and armed opposition groups continue to fight the Pakistan army in the north west frontier province.

⁶ In May 2009, the Sri Lankan government formally declared an end to the 25-year civil war after the army took control of the entire island and killed the leader of the Tamil Tigers formally known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE had once controlled a wide swathe of the north and much of the east.

⁷ In Bangladesh though the decades-long Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) conflict officially ended with the signing of the 1997 Peace Accord between the government and the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) confrontations between the two main armed groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) and the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) continue on a low scale. The CHT conflict was yet another manifestation of an identity conflict that protested against Bengali hegemony and that was met with the repressive machinery of the Bangladesh state.

⁸ In Nepal new identity assertions have taken place one of which consist of people in the Terai (plain) region who distinguish themselves from the hill people (Pahadi) and those of Himali (Himalaya) origin. This identity based politics has manifested itself in questions of political representation in Nepal and the manner in which the federal structure is to be designed- whether in terms of ethnicities or geographical areas.

⁹ For 1983 the island state of Sri Lanka had been in the grips of a civil war

¹⁰ KPS Gill as Punjab police chief in the 1990s is widely credited for crushing terrorism in India's Punjab in the 1980s and early 90s though at the cost of strong allegations of the excessive force used by security forces and human rights violations.

For a start, it is too early to conclude the military defeat as a final solution of the Tamil aspirations in Sri Lanka. The so-called "Gill Formula" as a causal explanation for the resolution of the Sikh aspirations in the Punjab remains open to question. Historically, within India's political economy, the secessionist demands of the Sikh group-identity never had any widespread social base. It was overwhelmingly stoked by the ill-advised "Operation Bluestar" followed by the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. However the consequently humiliated Sikh alienation was considerably assuaged by the subsequent transparent "Operation Black Thunder" against militants misusing place of worship as sanctuary and also by the actions of many civil rights groups' activist interventions to identify the culprits of the riots. New developmental funds targeted at the unemployed youth, and the widespread aversion within the civil society against the numerous innocent victims of terrorist violence further isolated the militants. By the time Gill employed his "Formula", its targets were overwhelmingly criminals despised by the community which welcomed it unlike ever before in the post-Bluestar phase. Consequently the "Gill Formula" only proved its legitimacy as an effective policy-option to deal with criminals, and not against any long-term aspirations of Sikh group-identity.

In fact, as I would argue in this essay, similar high-handed measures periodically against the demands of politically organised group identities in South Asia, as for example, in Kashmir in the two terms of Jagmohan as Governor, as also in the erstwhile East Pakistan by its successive military regimes, have been counter-productive, and they have in fact invariably led to further radicalisation of both the goals and means of such assertions.

In many ways, democratic India's periodic response to the Kashmiri peoples' regional aspirations bears such a close parallel with the Pakistani military-bureaucratic regime's attitude to the comparable aspirations of its erstwhile Eastern wing that they provide good test cases for reflecting on the impact of repressive measures against politically mobilised popular aspirations for regional autonomy. In both cases, such measures cost the regimes their moral legitimacy in the hearts and minds of large sections of the people in the two regions, though for India, the end-result of such alienation has till now remained different from the Pakistani experience in its Eastern wing. This asymmetry is possibly explained by the shifting vagaries of International politics, and also the periodic democratically incubated monitoring - howsoever weak and flawed - by India's civil society against some of the operational excesses of the ham-handed law enforcement agencies in Kashmir. It can not as is argued in some quarters provide evidence of the effectiveness of repressive measures per-se, against political aspirations of alienated group-identities.

In this sense, Pakistan's policy options through its prolonged military regimes have had relatively weaker civil society based corrective possibilities. Yet, despite this asymmetrical social base of the two neighbouring regimes, both have similarly responded to their specific challenge posed by the aspiration of regional autonomy to perceived state sovereignty; and their respective mainstream media have also conformed similarly. They have been conveniently sympathetic to the regional aspirations of their neighbours but insensitive to similar demands in their own state. They have hardly ever learnt from each other's mistakes.

The Kashmir issue in India and the East Pakistan Issue in undivided Pakistan: Some Similarities and Differences

While in the case of Jammu & Kashmir, Article 370 of the Indian constitution was a formal endorsement of its special status from the beginning of the state's integration with the Indian federation, Pakistan's emergence as a unitary state was a clear violation of the "Pakistan Resolution" (1940) of the Muslim League initiated by the East Pakistani leader Fazlul Haque

based on the promise of the League leaders to create two separate autonomous states in the two wings of Pakistan. Yet, despite this striking initial difference in the attitudes of the two regimes to the existential reality of the regional aspirations in their respective states, policy responses to such aspirations in the two states has been strikingly similar. Before the creation of Pakistan, Jinnah asserted, “a man is a Punjabi or Bengali before he is a Hindu or Muslim.” Yet, after Pakistan came into being, Urdu was imposed on the Bengalis as their only national language. When the Bengalis protested, they were fired upon in the Dacca University campus spawning its first “martyrs.” A later Pakistani Prime Minister, Suhrawardy who was also the former Muslim League Chief Minister of undivided Bengal who led the “Direct Action” in 1946 at the cost of a massive communal holocaust, dismissed the earlier promise contained in the original Lahore Resolution (1940). According to him “the two-nation theory was advanced by the Muslims as justification for the partition of India and the creation of a state ... once that state was created the two-nation theory lost its force even for the Muslims.”

Within two years of Pakistan’s creation, an East Pakistani legislator echoed the generally shared liberal criticism in both parts of the divided sub-continent against the increasingly centralising trends in governance. “After the achievement of freedom, there has been a race for centralisation of power both in India and in the central government of Pakistan. I consider it to be the most unsound and short-sighted policy. The provinces must be allowed to enjoy the full autonomous position, must be as free from the central government as it is thought practical.” In Kashmir, till as late as in 1974, during the Kashmir Accord with the Indira regime after his prolonged incarceration, Sheikh Abdullah reiterated “our quarrel with the Government of India is not about accession, but about the quantum of autonomy”.

But beyond this widely shared liberal resentment against centralisation in both countries, the perception of humiliation from the operational excesses of dominant groups is shared by the Bengalis in East Pakistan, and the Kashmiri Muslims in the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, despite their respective demographic majorities. This was poignantly expressed by Sheikh Abdullah as the only charismatic secular leader of the Muslim-majority state before its integration with India when he pointed out “In a country like Kashmir where Kashmiri Pandits cannot even tolerate the construction of a bathroom by Muslims on the banks of Jhelum, what is the use of preaching nationalism? People who cannot even tolerate the washing of hands and face by us on the banks of Jhelum surely cannot be united by us.” This humiliation perceived by the majority community in the attitude of the dominant minority group was not strikingly different in East Pakistan, as expressed by a legislator: “The attitude of the Muslim League coterie here was of contempt towards East Bengal, towards its culture, its language, its literature, and everything concerning East Bengal ... Far from considering East Bengal as an equal partner, the leaders of the Muslim League thought we are a subject race, and they belong to the race of conquerors.”

Despite this shared anguish of humiliation from the dominant minority groups in both East Pakistan and Kashmir, political aspirations of the majority also remained strikingly similar in both cases, at least to begin with. This included the demand for regional autonomy expressed through the available democratic channels and committed to secular goals, which in East Pakistan was expressed around Bengali cultural icons and in Kashmir around their *Kashmiriyat* counterparts. While the military-bureaucratic Islamic theocracy in Pakistan sought to repress the popular aspirations and its secular idioms as being “Hindu” and Indian-inspired, India’s secular-democratic state remained insensitive to the regional aspirations of its only Muslim-majority state, despite the impeccable secular credentials of its leadership. For example, through its long freedom struggle directed simultaneously against British colonial rule, and the local regime consisting of the king, Dogra landowners, and Pandit bureaucracy – all Hindus in the

Muslim majority state – Sheikh Abdullah never supported the Muslim League’s demand for Pakistan, never invited the League leaders to Kashmir, nor permitted any communal violence that was affecting the rest of the country. In fact, he dropped the “Muslim” prefix originally tagged with the National Conference at the cost of some resentment within his party, and politically remained allied with the Congress party despite pressures from Muslim communal groups.

Attempts of the Pakistani intelligence apparatus to foment communal violence, like the mysterious theft of the Holy Prophet’s relic from Hazratbal in 1965, were aborted through prompt and firm action, in this case, by the quick rediscovery of the missing relic. The year before, during the Pakistan-sponsored “Operation Gibraltar”, it was the Kashmiri people who identified the paratroopers to be handed over to the Indian army; and a Kashmiri Muslim won the highest gallantry award in the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965.

In fact, the first ever communal violence in the state of Jammu and Kashmir erupted in February 1986 during the most repressive first phase of Jagmohan’s rule as Governor. While till then, Pakistan had failed to sufficiently communalise the Kashmiri aspiration for regional autonomy, it was the operational distortions of Indian politics that stoked it to Pakistan’s advantage, at least to begin with. In more recent time it provided the social base to promote cross-border Islamic terrorism in the valley. In this context, it is important to remember that the repressive and corrupt structure of governance unleashed by the ‘National Emergency’ of 1975-77 also provided the first major post-partition trigger to a quantum-leap in the re-incubation of communal politics across the board in India, with its predictable impact in Jammu and Kashmir. For example, in the general elections of 1977, following the National Emergency, the erstwhile Jan Sangh, Akali Party, Muslim League, all popularly perceived “martyrs” of the repressive Emergency regime, flaunting secular masks, received a fresh lease of life across the country, and in the Jammu & Kashmir Assembly. For the first time in its history, Jamaat-e-Islami emerged with five elected members.

An equally significant impact of the post-Emergency elections of 1977 was the virtual routing of the two main national parties – Congress and the Janata Dal - in Jammu and Kashmir. This election heralded the emergence of the National Conference asserting the demand for autonomy as the main regional party. Yet when such aspirations were politically articulated, they were often confronted with accusations of threatening national security and the state’s regional minorities. This trend of increasing communal assertions in Jammu and Kashmir’s regional politics continued, almost in direct proportion to its democratic distortions like continued incarceration of its popular leaders like Sheikh Abdullah (longer than in colonial rule), rigged elections, corrupt administration, and unrepresentative leadership foisted by the central government. Simultaneously there was an increasing radicalisation of the content of autonomy in the regional aspirations. These were virtual replication of the East Pakistan scenario, paradoxically continued in the Indian state even after the Pakistani experience fully unfolded itself.

Aspirations for Regional Autonomy in Erstwhile East Pakistan and Jammu and Kashmir and Communalization of Politics :

East Pakistan’s secular and democratic aspiration for regional autonomy had asserted itself most forcefully in the first regional elections of 1954, in which the United Front (UF) under the leadership of Fazlul Haque the initiator of the Lahore (Pakistan) Resolution, won a massive majority routing the League which spearheaded the creation of Pakistan. The UF government was dismissed within one month, and all its leaders arrested, and charged for “high treason”,

including Fazlul Haque who was accused of being a “self-confessed traitor” for having committed the indiscretion of pleading for peaceful Indo-Pakistan relations in a public reception accorded to him in Calcutta. The mainstream Indian media was self-righteously critical of this “undemocratic” act of Pakistan’s central leadership. Earlier, in August 1953, when Sheikh Abdullah was arrested under the Preventive Detention Act of the Defence of India Rules for “high treason” on his return from Pakistan where he was sent with the blessings of the Nehru government, it was the turn of the Pakistani media to virtually paraphrase the Indian media’s reaction to the comparable events in East Pakistan. These historical parallels have been recurrent among the neighbours, as are trumped up “conspiracy cases” against regional leaders. These include charges against Sheikh Abdullah and his core-group in India, the “Agartala Conspiracy Case” trumped up against the fledgling new leader of East Pakistan Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led the secular Awami League after its original leader Bhasani had delinked its “Muslim” prefix, as earlier by Sheikh Abdullah’s National Conference in India’s J&K. Beginning from the dismissal of the UF Government in 1954, through the military rule in the country in 1958, till the country’s first election in 1968, East Pakistan remained disenfranchised largely because of its aspiration for autonomy.

In the elections of 1968, East Pakistan’s secular United Front, now with the Mujib-led Awami league at its helm, demanded a more radical version of regional autonomy in its six-point programme as manifesto, virtually recapturing the essence of the original “Pakistan Resolution.” In the election, despite massive riggings, the Awami League-led United Front won a majority of seats in the country. However the party was denied its democratic mandate, and its leaders arrested, thus triggering their “liberation struggle.” The massacre of 25 March 1971 unleashed by the armed forces under General Tikka Khan led to the final dénouement of the creation of the sovereign, secular, democratic republic of Bangladesh which seceded from the military-ruled Islamic theocracy of Pakistan. This also dented the legitimacy of religion as the basis of Pakistan’s national identity. The mainstream Indian media overwhelmingly celebrated it, but remained inadequately sensitive to similar trends in the Indian policy-responses to the Kashmiri aspirations for regional autonomy.

For example, in the “Kashmir Accord” negotiated by the Indira regime with Sheikh Abdullah in 1974 after his long imprisonment, the most important components were: i) permanence of Art.370 of the Indian Constitution; ii) review of all central legislations extended to the state after the latter’s arrest in August 1953. There could not have been a more forthright acknowledgement of the unrepresentative character of the regimes imposed on the state since the prolonged incarceration of its only charismatic leader. While this part of the Accord has till now remained unrequited, demands for the abrogation of Art.370 of the constitution has periodically emerged as a major issue in Indian politics. In fact, the Accord provided for a more limited version of autonomy than such demands periodically made by other political parties in India, and also as contained in East Pakistan’s “Six-Point Programme” in the elections of 1968 which was applauded in India. Instead, in Jammu and Kashmir elections continued to be rigged and local leaders harassed, and corrupt governance patronised. In the 1980 elections in Kashmir, Mrs. Indira Gandhi played the communal card by publicly announcing in Jammu that the minorities were “insecure” in Kashmir, though till then there had not been any serious communal violence in the valley, unlike the rest of India.

The silent tribute of the entire valley to Sheikh Abdullah at his death in 1982, was another manifestation of the widespread mass base of the demand for regional autonomy espoused by him and the highest security alert of the Indian armed forces on that occasion, was also a manifestation of the irreversible dent in the credibility of the democratic process to respond to such demands. More menacingly for India, the demand for regional autonomy was assuming

communal overtones. In a macabre replication of East Pakistani politics before its secession, while Farooq Abdullah was appointed as Chief Minister with Congress support after accusing him of spreading insecurity among the minorities, in the next election of 1983 after his father's death, under regional pressures when he raised the issue of the dishonoured pledges of the 1974 Accord, Mrs Gandhi again used the communal card in her election speeches in Jammu and was applauded by the RSS. Both accused him again of threatening the minorities long before the mass migration of the Kashmiri Pandits that happened during the second stint of Jagmohan as Governor in the nineties.

This is the sense in which the operational distortions of India's democratic politics stoked communalism in J&K's regional politics. This scenario also provided the backdrop to the subsequent insecurity of the Pandits and their flight from the valley in which they constituted an important component of its ruling coterie before its integration with India's democratic politics. Some of them were also close advisers of India's Kashmir policy especially in the era of Nehru and Indira Gandhi. In fact, the impeccable secular credentials of some Kashmiri Pandits at the national level in Indian politics, in sharp contrast to their insensitivity to the regional aspirations of the Kashmiri Muslims, would underscore the role of religion in the power politics of identities in both parts of the sub-continent. For, even in the erstwhile East Pakistan, Bengali Muslims who had played a critical and often bloody role in the partition of the sub-continent on religious lines in 1947 were soon in the forefront of the demand for autonomy on the basis of their linguistic identity in the new state of Pakistan leading to its equally bloody secession.

In the regional elections in Jammu and Kashmir in 1983, for the first time, votes were sharply polarised on communal lines between the Congress and the National Conference, predictably, helping the National Conference to win. In spite of its past, the National Conference was almost pushed to become a party of the Muslims of the valley. Soon, massive defections were engineered from the party, and family intrigues helped to dismiss the Farooq regime to install Shah with Congress support. This scenario, reminiscent of the politics of East Pakistan in the fifties, was also the prelude to the first major communal tension in the valley, dismissal of the Shah regime, and the reimposition of Governor's Rule again under Jagmohan against the opposition of all the regional parties in the valley. By then, despised in the valley and hero-worshipped in Jammu, Jagmohan epitomised the polarisation of the state politics on communal lines. The following Congress- National Conference coalition government brokered with a politically bruised Farooq by Rajiv Gandhi had already forfeited its democratic credibility in the region.

The consequent political vacuum further undermined the ideological appeal of secular democratic politics in the valley. This happened despite the fig-leaf flaunted in the following elections of 1987 which till now is remembered as the byword of electoral malpractices than for its inconsequential results. As for the results, despite massive riggings by the Congress--National Conference coalition, the opposition Muslim United Front won 30% electoral votes, well short of a majority. Fearing repression, its supporters crossed the borders to be welcomed by the open arms of the ISI, thus replicating the RAW in East Pakistan. Operating either underground or from across the border, the political strength of the militants was provided by the comic opera of the elections of 1989 in which their call for a boycott received massive popular support. But by then the non-cooperation movement in the valley was no longer non-violent. With the credibility of the democratic process irreversibly dented, as in the aftermath of the 1968 election in Pakistan, the valley's militants now called themselves freedom fighters like their "muktibahini" counterparts in East Pakistan.

But Jammu and Kashmir is still a constituent state of the Indian federation, with its special status guaranteed by Art.370 of the constitution, unlike Pakistan's erstwhile eastern wing. But despite the asymmetry in the ultimate dénouement that are rooted more in the shifting current of international relations, the penultimate consequences of insensitive repression of political aspirations of group identities as presented in this narrative are comparable. The democratic process has lost its legitimacy as a credible source of response to popular aspirations. This provides the ideal social base for militancy and terrorism, with or without cross-border support which, anyhow, in South Asia for reasons already discussed, are never in short supply.