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INSURRECTION

Kashmir's Crisis

Upon learning of the September 11 attack upon America, India's Prime Minister, Sri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, said, "Our prayers rise for those who have been killed. Our hearts go out to those who have lost their loved ones. Every Indian feels for them. More than that, at least 53,000 families in India know exactly the pain they are going through at the moment; for terrorists have mowed down and blown up that number here in India over the last two decades." The subsequent "War on Terror" has shed a welcome light on Kashmir as the world comes to learn what India faces. The following story was planned for this issue of Hinduism Today months before the attacks. After September 11, what is happening in the formally tranquil valley of Kashmir is ever more relevant to Hindus and non-Hindus alike.

Sarwanand Kaul Premi, 64, was a well-known Kashmiri

poet and scholar living in Soaf Shali in Anantnag district. Despite militancy claiming numerous Hindu lives in and around his village, Premi refused to leave his homeland. Then on April 30, 1990, terrorists burst into his home and, with guns waving ordered his family to collect all their gold and valuables and put them into an empty suitcase. Both Premi and his 27-year-old son, Virender Kaul, were taken by the terrorists. They were found tortured and murdered two days later. This is not an isolated case. It is one that resonates from every Hindu house in Kashmir.

Kashmir is one of the as-yet-unsolvable problems caused by the disastrous partition of India in 1947. The ruler of Kashmir was given the choice to join India or Pakistan, but failed to make his decision by the deadline. Shortly after independence, the ruler joined India, but Pakistan invaded Kashmir, seizing about half the Indian state. The Indian army was succeeding at pushing them out when a UN-backed ceasefire took hold in 1949, with the state divided along the "Line of Control" between the two armies. Constant hostility and occasional outbreaks of war have continued ever since. Today three million people live in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and nine million in the India-administered area.

Pakistan-backed militants became active in the late 1980s, leading to the murder of Premi and others. Now,

nearly everyone in the Valley has seen, heard or experienced the wrath of militants in their unending bid to create a "pure" Islamic state in this mountainous Shangrila, to end Indian rule and become part of Pakistan. To a certain degree, they have been successful. Hundreds of thousands of Hindus, and a considerable number of Muslims, have fled the Valley. Some who have moved from their homeland have settled in the United States and formed organizations to address the problems in hopes of finding a remedy. Their cause was greatly helped when the US State Department's October 5, 2001, list of 28 "Foreign Terrorist Organizations" included the Harakat ul-Mujahidin, which it described as "an Islamic militant group based in Pakistan that operates primarily in Kashmir."

When asked about their experience, everyone has a story to tell. "My cousin was killed in crossfire," laments Rajiv Pandit. "My uncle, Captain S. K. Tikoo, survived an assassination attempt. He is General Secretary of the Jammu and Kashmir Awami Conference and has been in Srinagar for the past five years. Many of his Hindu friends have been assassinated. All of our relatives fled from Srinagar in the middle of the night in January, 1990, after that assassination attempt on my uncle."

Militancy has held Kashmir hostage for the past twelve years and has claimed the lives of over 12,000 innocent civilians. As a result of the world's new War on Terrorism following September 11, what has been obvious to India for years is becoming increasingly clear to everyone else, that elements within Pakistan have been actively sponsoring and training militants in waging a proxy war against India-administered Kashmir. The victims have been innocent Kashmiris, particularly Hindus, whose lives and industries have been disrupted.

Kashmir's ancient Hindu heritage has left an indelible mark on the region. From the ancient temples built by Adi Shankaracharya to the literature written by numerous scholars, Kashmir was the center of Hindu and Buddhist art and learning from time immemorial. Even after the conversion of Pandits to Islam by countless Muslim rulers, Kashmiris continued to hold on to their heritage, so much so that during Raja Ranbir Singh's time, converted Muslims sought a return to their ancestral Hindu faith. Prior to the Partition, Hindus and Muslims lived peacefully side by side, as they did in numerous areas of India.

The name "Pandit" implies being a teacher, which some Kashmir Pandits are. Most, however, are agriculturalists and business people. Lalit Wanchoo, former president of the Kashmir Overseas Association, commented, "Before the 1947 invasion by the Pakistan army, Pandits and Muslims had been living with rare communal incidents. Now communal riots and the killing of Hindus is a common thing."

The scale of the confrontation in Kashmir is apparent from the number of troops stationed there. Human Rights Watch puts it at 400,000 soldiers, while in 1998, Jane's Intelligence Review estimates 600,000—almost half of India's armed forces of 1.3 million. By comparison, the entire United States military has 1.5 million active-duty soldiers. In addition to the Indian army regulars, there are another 300,000 civilians enlisted in Village Defense Committees. The violence takes several forms, including attacks directly against police stations and Indian army posts. Marriage parties have been massacred, and pilgrims on their way to Amarnath Cave killed, in spite of heavy security.

Since the militancy began in 1989, over 400,000 Hindu Kashmiri Pandits have fled the Valley, only to take shelter in government refugee camps in Jammu, Delhi and elsewhere. And after twelve years, there they remain, for fear of their lives and the safety of their families. The camps in Jammu were originally tents, but in the last few years have been upgraded to concrete buildings [see page 24 for a report on the Jammu camps]. "The situation is extremely dismal," says Rajiv Pandit, "with the worst part being that the future generation is being decimated. When people are worried about survival, it is culture that is lost."

Hindu Kashmiris from every walk of life have been affected by the militancy.

www.kashmir-information.com is replete with stories about the lives ended short by the terrorists. For example, on April 29, 1998, 29 Hindu villagers, including 13 women and children, were singled out and killed by insurgents. Being a woman leaves one a very vulnerable target, such as the case of Girja Tikoo, a laboratory assistant at Government Girls High School in Trehgam who was abducted on April 6, 1990, gang raped and shredded to death on a saw mill. On August 13,

1990, Babli Raina, a teacher at the Education Department in Sopore, was gang raped in front of her family and then murdered. Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org) charges there are human rights violations both by the militants and the Indian armed forces. A library of reports on Kashmir is kept at www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/cds/countries/kashmir.html.

The militancy is slowly gaining ground in Jammu, which has a Hindu majority. In July, 2001, 15 Pandits who had gone to graze their livestock were murdered, and in August, two Hindu monks were killed at a Kali Temple near Surankot in Poonch district. Hoping to prevent other such incidents, the Army has been granted special powers to oversee the deployment of its troops and the protection of the community. Buddhist majority Laddakh has not been spared. This region experienced terrorism for the first time on July 14, 2000, when four Buddhist monks were killed.

India's news media tends to pay little attention to the killing of Hindus in Kashmir. For example, in

February, 1999, when missionary Graham Staines and his two sons were murdered by Hindus in Gujarat, the story occupied the media for weeks. But according to one count, the killing of 171 non-combatant Hindus in Kashmir in the three-month period from December, 1998, to February, 1999, received only minor attention in the Indian press, and less in the international press. Destruction of temples in Kashmir similarly has been underreported. When communal riots gripped India in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, the subsequent destruction of 22 ancient temples in Kashmir went ignored, as did attacks against 36 temples in 1986, eight in 1988, twelve in 1989, eight in 1990 and five in 1991. The lack of reporting has left Indians and the rest of the world with a hazy understanding of the region and has limited their ability to grasp the gravity of the conflict—until September 11.

K.S. Sudarshan, president of the RSS, offered this analysis of the Kashmir situation during his interview with Hinduism Today in Houston [see page 32]. "The Kashmir problem," he told our reporter, "has become a festering sore because of four mistakes committed in the initial stages.

After Independence, when the Pakistanis tried to usurp Kashmir, our army began to push them out, and may have succeeded. But Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, at the insistence of Lord Mountbatten, called a ceasefire. Because of that, some of Kashmir has remained with Pakistan to this day. The second mistake was that the issue was taken to the United Nations, again at the insistence of Mountbatten. The third was, even while Gopalaswamy Iyengar was making a strong case in favor of Kashmir acceding to India, Nehru announced a plebiscite, once more heeding the words of Mountbatten. In enacting Article 370 and giving special status to the state as a 'temporary measure,' Nehru committed the fourth error in expecting that, in time, the situation would fade away. It has not faded, but it has become the main obstacle in the full integration of Kashmir with the rest of the country. There can be no military solution. A resolution depends on the acumen of politicians."

Article 370 made Kashmir something of a country within a country, allowing it, for example, to enact laws that only the native born could own land there. Such privileges for locals fomented the call

for separate homeland and created a roadblock for the economic vitality and the political governance of the region. By never repealing the Article each time it comes up for review, the government of India maintains this obstacle for effective administration of the region, which in turn allows a vociferous call for an autonomous area based on demographics. But if one allows division along ethnic or religious lines, then hypothetically any region in the world with such a situation could call for succession, leading to the splintering of not only India, but many other countries as well.

Kashmiri Pandits are dismayed with the reactive measures of the Indian government in dealing with the situation. Many feel that just as Hindus living in Pakistan after Partition have been either killed or forced to flee, they, too, are in danger of becoming extinct from their homeland. They are calling for immediate measures to safeguard their rights and have set up networks and organizations to disseminate information about their plight. In the United States, the Kashmir News Network (www.ikashmir.org) and Kashmir Overseas Association (www.koausa.org) work to create a

greater awareness about the situation, as well as provide support and educational facilities to Kashmiris living abroad, especially the youth. Magazines such as the *Asia Observer* and *Kashmir Today* regularly cover the events unfolding in the Valley.

The Pandits want to see an end to violence and return to their homeland to regain the life that they once knew. Their fond memories are imbedded in stories and poems, notably by Kashmir-born Dr. Subhash Kak in his famed *The Secrets of Ishbar*. His poems reflect the simple beauty of the region and the desire to return. In his poem entitled "Exile," Kak summarizes what every Pandit is feeling, "The best paradise is the paradise we are exiled from."

According to Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik in Delhi, many Indians privately, though not necessarily publically, would consider as reasonable a solution based upon accepting the existing Line of Control as the new international boundaries. Many other Indians consider this a dishonorable solution. They regard each and

every inch of Kashmir as part of India and will settle for nothing less than the return of the entire state.

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