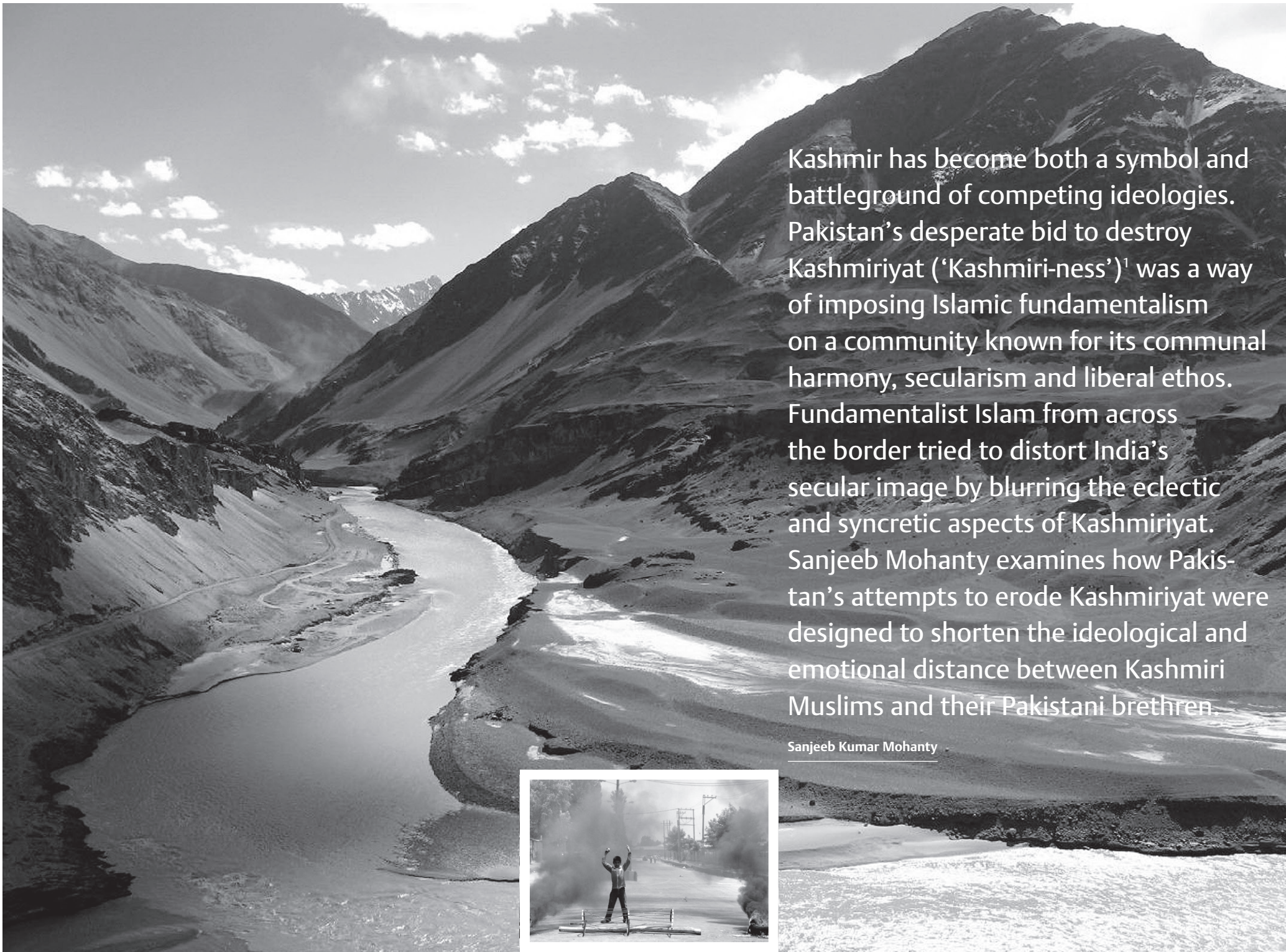


# Eroding Kashmiriyat



Kashmir has become both a symbol and battleground of competing ideologies. Pakistan's desperate bid to destroy Kashmiriyat ('Kashmiri-ness')<sup>1</sup> was a way of imposing Islamic fundamentalism on a community known for its communal harmony, secularism and liberal ethos. Fundamentalist Islam from across the border tried to distort India's secular image by blurring the eclectic and syncretic aspects of Kashmiriyat. Sanjeeb Mohanty examines how Pakistan's attempts to erode Kashmiriyat were designed to shorten the ideological and emotional distance between Kashmiri Muslims and their Pakistani brethren

Sanjeeb Kumar Mohanty



PAKISTAN'S VIEW OF INDIA through the prism of bigoted Islam has been guided by its communal and non-secular mindset. This mindset questions the reality of Kashmiriyat (the ethno-cultural identity and values of Kashmiris). The challenge from Pakistan has essentially been related to Kashmir's ethno-cultural assertion in a plural society. Pakistan has achieved considerable success in transforming the nature of Islam in Jammu and Kashmir, from a more tolerant Sufi kind into something more Arab Sunni in character. This was necessary for sustaining militancy in the state, and to mobilise Kashmiri sentiment in favour of Pakistan and away from political forces supporting independence. However, the effort to change the nature of Islam in the valley was also intended to make the resolution of the political problem of Jammu and Kashmir still more difficult. Pakistan's aim of grabbing Kashmir has remained constant but the manner of doing so has been changing from military to militancy. The Pakistani backed separatists tried all possible means to break Kashmir's connection with India by tearing apart the fabric of Kashmiriyat tradition. The on-going conflict in Kashmir has deeply affected this centuries-old Sufi-Sant thesis of the brotherhood of man.

In fact, centrality of Islam as the basis of its ideological belief created this problem in Pakistan. The late 1980s saw the seeds of Islamic fundamentalism taking root in the valley as a sequel to the late Zia-ul-Haq's seminal strategy to incite the locals into militancy so that Kashmir would be on fire from within. Since the 1970s, Islamabad has been training Sikh and other Indian separatist movements as part of the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's strategy of 'forward strategic depth'<sup>2</sup> and also as a part of its effort to avenge its 1971 defeat and bifurcation. By 1983, Zia's preparation for covert operation against India, first in Punjab and subsequently in Kashmir was ready. Zia believed that the Kashmir dispute would be solved 'within the context of an Islamic government in Afghanistan, a struggle in Kashmir and an uprising in Punjab'.<sup>3</sup> However, the 1971 Bangladesh war set the tone for Pakistan's long-term strategy to bring about mass insurrection in the valley through propagation of 'Islamic brotherhood' as against the prevailing notion of Kashmiriyat. The initial unrest got turned into a mass uprising, led by fundamentalist Muslims, by the end of 1990.

ABOVE INSET: A child in Indian-administered Kashmir. Photograph by Abid Bhat.  
LEFT: High alert status: Kashmiri Muslim school girls walk past Indian paramilitary soldiers in Srinagar. Picture courtesy of EPA.

## Secular identity vs. Islamic identity

Indeed, Kashmir was the only area in India where, as of the mid-1980s, Islamic revivalism had taken a radical political stance and where the slogans of the Islamic state have been publicly raised and received with growing popularity. There was a marked erosion of the secular Kashmiri personality and a Muslim identity with fundamentalist overtones started emerging rapidly. Therefore, it also became imperative for emerging separatist leaders to give the struggle a pan-Islamic character.<sup>4</sup> Syed Ali Shah Gilani of the Jammat-e-Islami of Kashmir, a prominent secessionist leader, openly supported the idea of Islamic brotherhood and his pan-Islamism was based on the concept of *Ummah* (unity based on Islamic solidarity).

During the first phase of militancy which started in 1989, the Pakistani-backed Islamist militant groups tried to bring 'structural changes at cultural levels of Kashmiri society',<sup>5</sup> in an effort to Islamicise the socio-political set up in the valley. The Islamist orientation of insurgency became more pronounced with the forced displacement of Hindu Kashmiri Pundits, which impacted the socio-cultural set up and secular polity of Kashmir. Pakistani sponsored Islamists had a clear objective to cleanse the state of non-Muslim minorities. Their other aim was to eliminate the traditional social and religious practices of Kashmir Muslims, who trace their origins to Kashmiriyat. By the end of 1990, the issue of Islamic brotherhood had fetched increased international support particularly from Islamic countries. General Zia did not want to see that the resistance in Jammu and Kashmir to New Delhi's rule should acquire a credible secular edge. So, he played the Muslim card to distort the secular image of India. India, on the other hand, has been emphasising that Pakistan is fanning controversy in Jammu and Kashmir merely because it has an ideological bias against secular politics.

## From soft Sufi to radical Islam

Pakistan tried to indoctrinate the gullible masses in Kashmir with selected discourses on radical Islam as opposed to the tolerant facets of Islam represented by Sufism. Since Sufism preached universal brotherhood, irrespective of creed, faith or temporal denomination, the hardcore Islamists from Pakistan overturned everything that soft Sufi (liberal Islam) stood for. Indian Islam, in fact, has its own indigenous flavour and it finds its best expression in the Sufi way of life in the Kashmir valley. Kashmir Islam is renowned for its commitment to tolerance of all streams of thought. To many Kashmiris, Kashmiriyat embodies religious and social harmony and brotherhood. The syncretic aspect of Kashmiriyat has been a gift of Rishi-Sufi order, which is an expression of Hindu-Muslim solidarity and religious harmony.

Pakistan's policy makers initially tried to prolong the conflict in Kashmir, terrorise the minorities and taint the Kashmir freedom struggle with communal colour, but did not try to dislodge India from the state. Their immediate plans were designed to buy time for a long-term strategy and the crux of this strategy has been to undermine the forces of Kashmiriyat, by dividing them and depriving them of their religious underpinnings. Indirectly, Pakistan employed dreadful coercive methods to blur the 'ethno-religious identity of Kashmir',<sup>6</sup> and substitute the Islamic identity enveloped in Rishi (analogous to Sufi order) traditions with a militant and violent Muslim identity. Pakistan's planners have shown a greater sensitivity to the contradictions between the Kashmiri-Sufi Islam and Pakistan's dominant Sunni version. They were also aware that the fear of imposition of Sunni Islam on them is what makes most Kashmiris stay clear of Pakistan. So Pakistan's long-term strategy during the first half of the 1990s was to eliminate this confrontation by absorbing Kashmir's special brand of Islam into the larger pan-Islamic Sunni tradition.<sup>7</sup> Islamic fundamentalism from Pakistan negates Sufism and has tried in the past to wipe out Sufi orders through mayhem and religious persecution. Pakistan's Wahhabi fundamentalists are anti-Sufi. Their argument is that the Sufi way is an impure way and their practices are non-Arabic. The Wahhabi practices, on the other hand, are purely Islamic. It is for this reason that the fundamentalists portrayed Sufism as an impure importation into the land, not falling within the ambit of the fundamentals of original Islam.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, the leaders of the Kashmiri independence movement, including Seikh Abdullah, never wanted a merger with Pakistan. Their movement was fuelled by the desire to preserve Kashmiriyat, their special ethno-cultural identity and way of life. The Kashmiri Pundits feel that the Kashmiriyat and Rishi cultures of Kashmir have been shattered into pieces by



Islamic fundamentalism, aided and abetted by Pakistan. Pan-Islamic fundamentalism still continues to pose a serious threat to Kashmiri nationalism. Pakistan felt that the division of Jammu and Kashmir along communal lines will strengthen the sentiments of Muslim solidarity which can then be used to undermine Kashmiriyat. In fact, 'lack of adequate support by secular national parties to the genuine aspirations of the region helped this process of communalization'.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, Kashmiri separatism and Hindu communalism in Jammu and elsewhere reinforced each other to the advantage of Pakistan, which saw the militancy in Jammu and Kashmir as jihad. Hence, both material and moral support is provided by Pakistan through the emergence of what may be described as a militant pan-Islamic jihad. Pakistan entered the scene with its theory of Islamic brotherhood and forced Kashmiri Muslims to abjure the idea of the brotherhood of man. Pakistan's message was 'love your neighbour more than your brother',<sup>10</sup> which was followed in letter and spirit during the phase of insurgency. Moreover, systematic attempts have been made by Pakistan to introduce the ideology of fundamental Islam from outside, an ideology that is alien to the culture of Muslim saints which flourished at the beginning of the 15th century. Sufism was supplanted by radical Islam. For the infiltrators from across the border, religion was merely a tool to exploit the susceptibilities of the masses and to tear apart the socio-cultural fabric of Hindu-Muslim unity.

## Strong syncretic factor

In spite of the Pakistani game plan, Kashmiriyat, the composite culture with glorious traditions of communal amity, tolerance and compassion is still flourishing. Pakistani mercenaries were under the impression that the selective killing of Hindus and Sikhs in the state would help their cause, and give a devastating blow to the secular image of India. The onset of militancy in Kashmir from 1989 led to the mass exodus of Hindu Pundits from the valley and the violent attacks against the remaining communities was an attempt by the militants to erode the fabric of Kashmiriyat. Kashmir's Muslims had faced the gravest challenge to their secular ethos following partition. Their deep commitment to tolerance and secularism emanates from composite Hindu-Muslim culture which Pakistan tried

to weaken during the insurgency phase in Kashmir. In fact, during the insurgency phase, secular India faced a unique challenge in tackling the influence of radical Islam in the Kashmir valley. But, even during the worst days of a traumatised Kashmir society, faith in this composite syncretic aspect remained unchallenged.

The advent of Islam in Kashmir gave birth to inter-sectarian conflict, religious conversion and separatism. Fundamental Islam does not permit its followers to forge links with any country and its culture. Pakistan, unfortunately, subscribes to this idea. During the insurgency, India was not fighting a war in Kashmir, but here, a purely domestic uprising was turned into a low-intensity conflict by Pakistan through training, equipping, financing, supplying manpower and encouraging cross-border terrorism in the name of Islam. There was, of course, within the militant movement, a 'strong pro-Pakistani Islamic current'.<sup>11</sup> Having designated Islam as a creed that was potent enough to challenge the communist thrust into Afghanistan, it became necessary to promote the combative and aggressive aspects of the faith (Islam) on the part of Pakistan, and India had to bear a major brunt of it in Kashmir.<sup>12</sup> In India, we have seen Islamic fundamentalism's most ugly face in Kashmir where a violent secessionist movement has been engineered by Muslim radicals supported by Pakistan. This is the biggest legacy of General Zia who wanted to make Pakistan the centre of worldwide Islamic resurgence and who brought the Islamic parties to the centre stage.

## Conclusion

Pakistan has, all along, tested tolerance by attempting to weaken the syncretic aspect of Kashmiriyat. Pakistan must realise that in the ongoing struggle between secularism and fundamentalism, the former is always the winner, since the faith in the socio-cultural fabric of Hindu-Muslim unity in Jammu and Kashmir shall remain unchallenged. We must not see the conflict in the state as being between Hindus and Muslims, but as between national and anti-national forces. Islam in India is much more syncretic than elsewhere. This inclusivist tendency has been prevalent since the pre-colonial period of Mughal rule in India. At a time when radical Islamic ideologies are trying to gain the upper hand across the world, Indian Muslims have shown their deep commitment to the secular ideal. The Pakistani strategy during the insurgency phase was to create social and communal disorder and thereby weaken the secular base of communal amity. In fact, Pakistan was under the impression that Kashmiriyat had no psychic roots in the state, except in the plural reverence for other religions. This illusion prompted Pakistan to transplant its fundamentalist ideology to combat the liberal Hindu ideal of brotherhood of man which emanates from the philosophy of '*sarvadhama sambhava*'.<sup>13</sup>

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## Notes

1. Kashmiriyat is the ethno-national and social consciousness and cultural values of the Kashmiri people. Emerging approximately around the 16th century, it is characterised by religious and cultural harmony, patriotism and pride for their mountainous homeland of Kashmir. The tradition of *Kashmiriyat* has been deeply affected by the ongoing Kashmir conflict and by communal violence between Muslims and Hindus (Source - Wikipedia).
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5. Punjabi, Riyaz. 'The Threat from Taliban', *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi 25 October, 1998.
6. Punjabi, Riyaz. 1993. 'The Concept of Islamic Caliphate: The Religious and Ethnic pulls of Kashmir Militant Movement', *Journal of Peace Studies*, 1(1), November-December 1993. p.42.
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10. Khazanachi, Ramesh. 'Kashmir: Soft Sufi to Radical Islam', *Times of India*, New Delhi, 20 December, 1998.
11. Editorial, 'Blurring the Issue', *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 4 December, 1995.
12. Editorial, 'A Frankenstein', *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 9 March, 1995.
13. Literally meaning that all Dharmas (truths) are equal to or harmonious with each other.

TOP: The Azad Kashmir Regiment, one of six infantry regiments of the Pakistan Army.  
MIDDLE: Kashmiri Muslim women lower their heads during prayers at Hazratbal Shrine in Srinagar, Kashmir, India. Photography by Abid Bhat.  
BOTTOM: Mother and her children in refugee camp in Kashmir.