MAPPING THE DEBATE ON KASHMIR

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The bloodshed in Kashmir beginning in June this year gave rise to a heated debate in India concerning the causes of and possible solutions to the conflict. Unfortunately, the usual positions publicized by the media leave little hope of any resolution. The Indian ultra-nationalists, most vociferously represented by the Sangh Parivar but present even among sections who claim to be more liberal, are undoubtedly a major part of the problem. Their dogmatic assertion that Kashmir is an integral part of India – as though India's national boundaries are god-given and any questioning of them is blasphemy – goes with a justification of horrific atrocities committed against Kashmiris by the Indian security forces. Their allegation of sedition against Arundhati Roy for questioning this dogma, and hysterical outburst against the government-appointed interlocutors for suggesting that any solution to the problem requires the involvement of the government of Pakistan, make it clear that they themselves have no solution to offer short of war between two nuclear-armed countries.

Pretending that Kashmir is not disputed territory must appear to most observers as a typical instance of burying one's head in the sand to avoid seeing what is obvious to everyone else; breathing fire and brimstone at anyone who acknowledges the reality is obviously a non-starter so far as resolving the problem is concerned. But more disurbingly, advocating coercion to stamp out protest in Kashmir and a clampdown on freedom of expression to prevent discussion of the issue constitutes an assault on democracy. To destroy India's integrity as a democracy in order to preserve its territorial integrity is, hopefully, not a 'solution' that most people would find morally or politically acceptable.

The Pakistani nationalist stance is the mirror opposite of the Indian nationalist one. Thus Kashmiri nationalists of Pakistan Administered Kashmir 'were kept away from the process of elections by a stipulation of Act 74, which states: "No one can contest elections of any kind in AK without taking oath of allegiance to Kashmir's accession to Pakistan"… Because of this clause, nationalists of Azad Kashmir were kept away from the elections and Pakistan has built a strong pro-Pakistan structure which aims to minimize the influence of nationalists in all walks of life' (Choudhry 2010). As in the case of the Indian nationalists, there appears to be little concern for the democratic rights of Kashmiris among Pakistani nationalists, and no solution in sight besides war between the two nuclear-armed countries.

The Left in India disagrees with both these positions, but does not have a unified position itself. This became clear in the course of the debate that followed a meeting, in Delhi on 21 October 2010 organized by the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners, entitled 'Azadi – The Only Way' (Minutes 2010). The keynote speaker representing the Kashmiri people at this meeting was Syed Ali Shah Geelani. The premise of the view expressed in this title is unconditional support for the right of nations to self-determination: 'The root of the Kashmir conflict is not oppression but identity. Kashmiris don't see themselves as Indian' (Vij 2010). Thus 'nation' is defined in terms of 'identity', presumably encompassing a common language, territory, economy, culture and history, as in Stalin's definition. According to this view, the people of Kashmir constitute a nation, and are therefore entitled to self-determination, defined as the right to form their own nation-state. The desire and right to fight for a separate nation-state are given in their feeling that they are different from Indians, and this would be so even if they were not oppressed by the Indian state and enjoyed all democratic rights (which, of course, is not the case at present).

The other position on the Left rejects identity as a basis for self-determination and sees democracy as the only justifiable basis for it. Human identity is immensely complex. There is a universal human identity, which we share with all other humans. We have common biological characteristics, which mean that when pricked, we bleed, when tortured, we suffer pain, when starved or shot in the heart, we die. But we also share in common the experience of coming into the world as helpless and completely dependent infants, an experience we carry within us whether we like it or not. Then we have particular characteristics – sex, ethnicity, language, religion, nationality, and so on – and finally the plethora of relationships (with family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and others), experiences and actions that make each one of us different from everyone else.

Identity politics picks up one of these particular characteristics – usually language, ethnicity, religion or

nationality – and makes it the basis for political identity and action. In the process, significant differences within the identity group (between workers and capitalists or socialists and fascists, for example) are obliterated. At the same time, what we share with people outside the group – most importantly, our humanity – is also negated. Thus identity politics both crushes differences within the group and dehumanises those outside it, making persecution of them seem justifiable. When identity based on religion, ethnicity or language is combined with nationalism, it makes a particularly toxic brew, because claims on territory are involved, and 'the other' is defined not only as all those outside the territory, but also as those within who do not conform to the prescribed identity.

The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) struggle for a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka illustrates these points clearly. Only rabid Sinhala nationalists would claim that Tamils have not been grievously oppressed in Sri Lanka. But was the LTTE's solution – armed struggle for national self-determination in the North-East of Sri Lanka, where Tamils were the majority but by no means the only community – an acceptable one? Right from the beginning, it involved massacres and ethnic cleansing of Sinhalese civilians from the territory claimed by the LTTE, massacres and ethnic cleansing of Muslims, and the torture and murder of thousands of Tamils who opposed this barbaric vision. Refugees and internally displaced people whom I interviewed included Tamil women whose Sinhalese husbands had been hacked to death by the LTTE, and Muslims who said their Tamil neighbours, with whom they had lived like brothers and sisters, had wept and pleaded with the LTTE not to evict them, but to no avail. These people were not oppressing the Tamils – quite the contrary. They had to be eliminated because they did not fit into the requisite 'Tamil identity'. Nor did Rajani Thiranagama, a Tamil doctor, lecturer and founding member of University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), who was gunned down by the LTTE as she cycled home from work, nor a militant of the Eeelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (the most Left-wing of the militant groups), who witnessed a roomful of his comrades slaughtered by the LTTE, and survived only because they thought he too was dead. (I have woven some of these stories into my novel, *Playing Lions and Tigers*, but the reality is far more gruesome than anything I could bring myself to describe.) Only a sleight of hand could portray these actions as 'the violence of the oppressed'; it should be abundantly clear that these are cases where the LTTE is the oppressor.

When there are no barriers to interaction, people from different communities spontaneously form bonds of solidarity, friendship and love. This is why ethnic and religious nationalism are necessarily so violent, because they have to tear these bonds apart. There were Sinhalese liberals who supported the LTTE in the belief that it was fighting against Sinhala nationalism, and doctrinaire Leninists who supported their right to self-determination. But this support merely allowed the LTTE to continue on its destructive and self-destructive path, strengthening the Sinhala nationalist backlash to a point where it could destroy the LTTE with massive civilian casualties. Tamil democracy activists, on the other hand, decided they had to oppose both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE because *both* were doing equal damage to their community: a difficult and dangerous option, but the only one that allowed them to adhere to the goal of bringing about greater respect for human rights and democracy.

Geelani's politics too has all the elements of ethno-religious nationalism. In Kashmir: Nava-e Hurriyat he 'claims that Muslims are a community/nation (qaum) wholly separate from the Hindus. He equates India with Hindus, overlooking the fact that India's Muslim population outnumbers that of Pakistan. He projects Muslims (as he does Hindus) as a monolithic, homogeneous community, defined by a singular interpretation of religion, and bereft of cultural, ethnic and other divisions. He depicts Muslims as radically different from Hindus, and as allegedly having nothing at all in common with them' (Sikand 2010, 126). This is an extreme right-wing ideology, which, as Geelani himself recognizes, shares the 'two-nation' theory with the Hindu Right.

How could anyone on the Left provide a platform to someone with such a reactionary agenda (a mirror image of Hindu Rashtra), or describe him as 'the tallest, most respected leader of the Kashmiri independence struggle'(Vij 2010)? Why should he be considered a leader of the Kashmiri independence struggle *at all*, much less the 'tallest and most respected', when he colludes with one of the states (Pakistan) that is occupying Kashmir? What makes this assessment even more inexplicable is that just across the Line of Control (LoC), the main enemy of Kashmiri nationalists is the Pakistani state (cf. Choudhry 2010a)! Indeed, in the statements of this section of the Indian Left, there is not even an acknowledgement that there are Kashmiris on the other side of the LoC fighting for independence from Pakistan, much less any attempt to extend solidarity to them. This abject failure of internationalism allows them to associate the slogan of 'azadi' and the description of 'most respected leader of the Kashmiri independence struggle' with someone

who, from the standpoint of Kashmiris across the LoC, stands for their continued enslavement (Choudhry 2010b).

Supporters of such positions reply that Geelani would probably shift over to support for an independent Kashmir under popular pressure, and this is conceivable. What is not conceivable, however, is that he would abandon his Islamist vision for Kashmir, which is shared by many others, as the slogans chanted in demonstrations suggest. But he is only one current out of many, the answer goes: 'Let a Constituent assembly decide what the people want!' (Vij 2010).

In the first place, this is dangerously naïve, not least because theocrats do not believe in constituent assemblies. When the Left in Iran (the largest in the Middle East) jumped on Khomeini's bandwagon, they no doubt had the same illusion. But Khomeini used a broad-based popular movement against the Shah to come to power, and then proceeded to decimate the Left. As Maziar Behrooz, the author of *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*, points out, the loss of women's rights was the most palpable consequence of the Islamic Revolution (*The Platypus Review* 2010). A similar outcome in Kashmir cannot be ruled out if a section of the Left in India insists on jumping on the Islamist bandwagon. And the consequences for women and dissenters would be similar, judging from the activities of Asiya Andrabi and her Dukhteran-e-Millat, who have thrown acid and paint in the faces of women to force them to wear the veil, and who warned Abdul Ghani Lone of dire consequences for his remarks against foreign Islamist militants and urged militants to take action against him (Suri 2002). When Lone was murdered (Bhagat 2002) on the anniversary of the assassination of Mirwaiz Muhammad Farooq by Pakistan-backed militants, it is not surprising that his son Sajjad blamed the ISI, Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (Jha 2002) and Geelani was kept away from his house (Chandran 2002).

In the second place, isn't it a rather Orwellian interpretation of 'self-determination' to make it mean that a Kashmiri leader who genuinely stands for an independent Kashmir is gunned down simply for demanding that foreign militants stop interfering in their struggle? Wouldn't this terrorize into keeping quiet,others who object to foreign militants allowing those who are allied with these militants to rule the roost? What does this portend for the future? Isn't there a serious danger of ending up with an alien culture (e.g. forcibly veiled women) being imposed on Kashmiris, and an intolerant, authoritarian state which stamps out all vestiges of democracy?

By contrast with the first tendency on the Left, which provides unconditional support to any group claiming to fight for the right to national self-determination, the second group provides support that is highly conditional and selective. Conditional on the premise that a separate state is demanded by the vast majority of the population in the territory claimed, and the promise that it will result in less oppression and bloodshed, more freedom, equality and democracy. And selective in the sense that even where the vast majority want to be free of foreign occupation, as in Afghanistan, reactionary, authoritarian groups like the Taliban would not be supported. 'Self-determination' should mean the right of people to determine their own lives, and the Taliban most emphatically does not stand for that. There are groups in Afghanistan like the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, which have chosen the courageous option of fighting against both the US/Nato occupation and the Taliban, and it is such groups that should receive support. Support for self-determination would be extended not on the basis of upholding 'identity', an utterly reactionary ideology which holds that people who are 'different' cannot live together in the same country, nor, presumably, in the same family, but on the basis of ending oppression.

Clearly, Kashmiris have hitherto not had the space to discuss and negotiate among themselves what kind of a state they want in order to project a unified agenda. So what can Indians do if they wish to oppose the hideous oppression occurring there? There is a more elementary meaning of 'azadi' that comes across in numerous fact-finding reports and the better newspaper reports from Kashmir: freedom from oppression by the Indian state. One atrocity after another without any justice in sight is a recipe for barbarism (see, for example, Bhatia et al. 2010). The heart-rending appeal to the people of India by the father of one of the boys killed by Indian security forces recently – 'Please feel our pain' (Subramanian 2010) – should lead to a broad-based campaign demanding repeal of legislation (like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act and the Disturbed Areas Act) that allows the security forces to commit human rights abuses with impunity, and punishment for security force personnel who have commited such crimes, including those with command responsibility. The bizarre argument that such punishment will 'demoralise' the security forces needs to be demolished. Surely security forces that routinely violate international humanitarian law have already lost much of their legitimacy? Wouldn't punishing the criminals who engage in such activities help to *rebuild* their morale?

Drastic reduction of the presence of security forces would also help to reduce the occurrence of such incidents.

The next step would be to campaign for the demilitarisation of Kashmir *on both sides of the LoC*. Demanding demilitarisation on the Indian side alone is neither realistic nor even desirable, if it facilitates the activities of foreign militants like those who killed Lone. Such a campaign would require working with socialists in Pakistan-Administered Kashmir and Pakistan itself, as demanded by the principle of internationalism. If it is successful, and the military and militants on both sides of the LoC back off, the people of Kashmir would have the space and opportunity to discuss, debate and negotiate among themselves to see if they can agree on a vision of Kashmir that is accepted by the overwhelming majority. If they agree on a separate state incorporating the principles of equality and democracy, then they should certainly obtain support from the Left and the rest of the world to attain it. There would still be a price to pay: being cut off from India on one side and Pakistan on the other by international borders requiring visas before they could be crossed. But this too could be solved if there is simultaneous movement towards a South Asian union (on the model of the European Union and similar unions in Latin America) with open borders. Indeed, such a development would make an independent Kashmir more likely to succeed.

To sum up: The dialogue on Kashmir between the Indian and Pakistani governments goes round and round like an old record stuck in a groove, with the same old arguments repeated by both sides. The section of the Indian Left demanding the unconditional right of the Kashmiri 'nation' to self-determination adds little clarity to the debate, because it remains narrowly India-centric (although anti-India, not pro), and fails even to acknowledge that Kashmir will not be 'free' if India withdraws from it, because part of Kashmir is occupied by Pakistan. Moreover, unconditional support means that extreme Islamist elements are also seen as worthy of support, ignoring the fact that they stand for a Kashmir as oppressive as the present dispensation.

By contrast, a more internationalist section of the Left sees that the imbroglio in Kashmir is part of the tragic legacy of Partition, along with the persecution of Muslims in India, Hindus in Pakistan, and Christians and Sikhs in both countries, and cannot be resolved unless that whole legacy is addressed. It rejects 'identity' as the basis for state-formation, and insists that a viable Kashmiri state must convince its minorities in advance that they will enjoy security, equality and democratic rights; sacrificing democracy to 'self-determination' is surely a contradiction in terms. A South Asian union with open borders, based on equality and democracy both within and between its constituent states, would create the possibility of an independent Kashmir that is not cut off from either India or Pakistan.

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