

Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh **Building Peace & Countering Radicalization**



Despite the recent elections for the Legislative Assembly of J&K and the Parliament during 2008-09 and the continuing cross-LOC interactions, the state of J&K has been witnessing an increasing radicalization of three distinct kinds – regional, religious and ethnic. While there has been much focus on military and human rights issues in the state, the growing regional antagonisms, radicalization and souring relations between various local communities, are newer trends that need to be studied and addressed.

It was with a view to understand these contemporary negative developments, that the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi, undertook a project on the above theme. The primary focus of the project was to understand the nature of change that has been taking place at various levels within the state and work towards building peace. It aimed to bring together the younger generation from different regions to discuss these emerging issues and reach an understanding on how to prevent further radicalization and build peace among the various communities of J&K. The project was specifically focused on the following three forms of radicalization:

Regional Radicalization

In recent months, there has been an unmistakable rise in the radicalization of regional sentiments between Jammu, Kashmir and



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Ladakh. The violence that followed the Amarnath Shrine Board crisis in Jammu and Kashmir regions, and the growing demand for Union Territory Status for Ladakh are expressions of how divided these three regions are today.

Administrative issues such as the establishment of educational institutions have also demonstrated their potential to exacerbate the regional divide, as was observed during the recent agitation in Jammu regarding the setting up of the Central University in the region.

Religious Radicalization

There has been a slow, but steady radicalization that has taken place between and within different communities in Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh.

Kashmir Valley has been well known for its practice of Sufi Islam, which has played an important role in preserving what is defined as *Kashmiriyat* – the composite cultural identity of the people in this region. Unfortunately today, both *Kashmiriyat* and Sufi Islam are under stress due to the radical onslaught, which has progressively crept into the state in recent years. A section of the younger generation, unlike their elders, does not believe as much in Sufi Islam. Led by certain militant groups, there has been a deliberate effort to alter the nature of Islam in the Valley. While the older generation stresses the Sufi nature of Islam, a section within the younger generation seems to be looking beyond Sufism.

In Jammu region, certain fundamentalist forces

have been trying to radicalize the Hindu youth. There have been deliberate attempts to use the Amarnath Yatra for instance, and places of Hindu worship such as Vaishno Devi, Ragunath Temple in Jammu, and Buddha Amarnath in Poonch district to radicalize the Hindus in the Jammu-Rajouri-Poonch belt. There seems to be a definitive trend in the sudden spurt in these yatras, under the deliberate patronage of certain groups.

Radicalization within communities has also had an adverse impact on the relations between communities, mainly Hindus and Muslims. The recent communal violence in Kishtwar, Rajouri, and Poonch bears testimony to this new trend. Despite the presence of different religious communities, these sub regions and cities have always maintained religious harmony. Though there have been tensions between communities, these have largely been contained through local dialogue. However, in the recent past, not only has J&K seen an accelerated recurrence of such tensions, but has also been witness to disturbances in one region or town spilling over to and adversely affecting the communal harmony in neighbouring regions/towns.

Ethnic Radicalization

Besides the religious and regional divide, one can also observe a growing divide between the Gujar and Pahari communities in the Jammu, Rajouri and Poonch belt. Ever since the Gujjars were granted the ST status, the Pahari community has felt disadvantaged. The parallel processions and counter arguments and articulation of interests by both these communities against each other are indicators of a growing divide that has the potential to affect the peace and harmony between these communities which share common space in these twin districts.

II METHODOLOGY

The project was divided into three phases. In the first phase, the Institute commissioned surveys to a select research team of the IPCS, which were conducted across the three regions – Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh, specifically in ten towns – Jammu, Rajouri, Doda, Kishtwar, Anantnag, Srinagar, Baramulla, Sopore, Kargil, and Leh. The surveys were conducted primarily among the youth, to understand their perceptions of religious, regional and ethnic differences, and the measures



they deem necessary for the state and civil society to adopt to prevent an escalation of conflict and violence. The questions were open-ended, seeking the opinion of the respondents to find what they considered the causes for radicalization and their recommendations on how the growing divide between communities may be addressed.

Additionally, the Institute also commissioned discussion papers on regional and religious issues to academicians, journalists, media persons, bureaucrats, researchers, and conflict resolution/transformation experts from Delhi and the regions of Jammu, Rajouri, Poonch, Doda, Kishtwar, Anantnag, Srinagar, Kargil, Leh, and Turtuk, to seek their perspectives and recommendations. These papers were subsequently discussed in interactive sessions during a workshop held in Jammu, in collaboration with the University of Jammu. Some of these papers have already been published in the December edition of *Epilogue*, a monthly magazine published from J&K.

In the second phase, the Institute organized a three-day workshop in collaboration with the University of Jammu on 'Building Peace and Countering Radicalization in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh', during 2-4 December 2009 in Jammu.

Three-day Workshop in Jammu University

The objective of the workshop was to engage people from the academic and strategic communities, media, and students from various regions of the state to reflect on the nature of radicalization and its impact on the region and people and also draft policy recommendations based on the deliberations of the workshop. The three regions of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh were discussed through background papers and survey reports.

The workshop primarily aimed to get the younger generation from different regions of the state to discuss and debate the issues outlined above. It brought together youth from varied backgrounds – students, scholars, and media persons, representing various communities of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, to deliberate on these issues in smaller, sub-groups and make specific recommendations on how to prevent further radicalization. The workshop also witnessed the participation of senior scholars who acted as



Resource Persons to help the younger participants understand the current issues in a larger perspective.

Additionally, the surveyors briefly presented the findings of the surveys conducted by them across J&K to give the participants a sense of ground level perceptions and in turn, make the workshop proceedings more meaningful.

During the workshop, the participants were divided into two groups to discuss religious and regional issues respectively, make policy recommendations and suggest measures to counter the growing radicalization. On the third day of the workshop, both groups made their recommendations on how to address the regional and religious differences in the state.

The final phase of the project which the Institute is currently engaged in is focused on the summation of the proceedings of the entire workshop as also the findings of the surveys conducted, through separate workshop and survey reports that will be made available on the IPCS website and circulated widely as news briefs among leading newspapers and magazines in Jammu and Kashmir. Further, the Institute will also bring out a set of recommendations to be submitted to the governments of India and J&K, and circulated among the civil society at large.

III FOCUS OF THE WORKSHOP: MAJOR ISSUES OF DEBATE

The discussion which spanned eight sessions, touched upon critical issues such as the regional differences within J&K, role of the Amarnath land row agitation in polarizing communities and regions and its spillover effect in other states, the gradual waning

of Sufi influence in the Valley, displacement of Kashmiri Pandits, alienation of Rajouri and Poonch districts, the growing Gujjar-Pahari divide in these twin districts, and the challenges that confront Ladakh since its division into Leh and Kargil districts, among other topical issues in the context of J&K.

The debates contributed to developing a nuanced understanding of regional perspectives on radicalization and underscored the fact that radicalization is not specific to a particular region or religion, but has infected all regions across J&K and the country in varying degrees.

The Amarnath land agitation, being a recent controversy, was the center of attention and debate during the first day of the workshop. The differences in perceptions of various communities, especially with respect to the 'economic blockade' were also debated at length. As the discussion proceeded, the misperceptions on either side regarding how each viewed the different phases of the Amarnath crisis, became evident. It became clear that these misperceptions had fueled significant insecurity and triggered negative responses from either side during the entire episode.

What also came to the fore during the debate on this and various other issues, was the physical isolation of different regions and lack of connectivity that have affected emotional linkages between and within the regions. Participants, especially from Leh, Kargil, Kupwara, Doda, Kishtwar, Rajouri, and Poonch, highlighted the existing situation in terms of connectivity and the urgent need to improve it. These sub regions, thanks to the lack of physical connectivity, have become inward-looking, isolated islands.

Besides these, the participants also debated another crucial issue—the allocation of funds for regional development. It was clear from the debate that every region and sub region believes there is an imbalance and that they are specifically being neglected while the other regions and sub regions are benefiting at their cost. However, in the absence of sufficient data to prove or disprove these claims, significant misperceptions continue to exist between the regions and sub regions. These misperceptions in turn, have fueled acerbic sentiments and mobilized people to respond violently. The recent violence and apprehensions regarding the Amarnath land and Central University rows are expressions of these misperceptions.

In view of the growing regional radicalization, the most interesting session was on identity politics in the districts of Doda, Kargil, Rajouri and Poonch. Speakers commented on the demand for autonomous development councils on grounds of distinct ethno-cultural community identities.

There was also an intense and emotional debate, on the issue of the tensions between the Gujjar and Pahari ethnic identities. It was pointed out by some that while the Gujjars have benefited immensely since being granted the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, the Paharis have lagged behind considerably. While the Gujjars maintain that they deserve the reservation status, the Paharis argue that they are just as deserving since both communities have been living together in the same space, share the same resources and have suffered the same social and economic challenges. This has led to a reinforcement of the ethnic divide between the two communities, while also bolstering demands from the non-Gujjars to be included in the ST category.

Ladakh, an Autonomous Hill Development Council, divided into Kargil and Leh with majority Shia Muslim and Buddhist populations respectively, is demanding a union territory status on the grounds that it has suffered on account of the gross negligence of both, the Union government and the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It also claims autonomy on the basis of preserving its own culture and the need to develop its regions economically, a need which has been subsumed by other concerns of the Jammu and Kashmir regions. Lack of physical connectivity, neglect by Jammu/Srinagar and poor social and economic indicators drive their demand to maintain an independent identity.

The workshop also witnessed intense debate on



internal displacement in J&K, especially with respect to the Kashmiri Pandits. While the discussion highlighted the role of violence in triggering internal displacement from Doda, Ramban, Kishtwar, Rajouri and Poonch regions; it was in particular, the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits and their possible return that became an emotionally charged debate.

Subsequently, the participants also debated religious radicalization in all the regions and sub regions of J&K. The growing attack on the Sufi tradition of Islam in J&K and the new and mounting pressures on the composite nature of the State's culture were also discussed, along with what could be done to counter this new negative trend.

The last session addressed the future concerns and measures that could help minimize the growth of radicalization in the state. The key areas discussed were roads, the economy, and tourism. It was suggested that the development of these would be an effective way to address the grievances of the people and build cross-regional bridges. The costs of non-cooperation between regions are significant because radicalization has not only constrained the growth of the economy, but has also impeded greater connectivity between the regions. The speakers emphasized the need to develop infrastructure and tourism to improve connectivity and enhance mobility across regional and religious divides.

IV MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

An important achievement of the workshop was organizing the young participants from different regions and sub-regions of J&K into two Working Groups to discuss these vital issues and make recommendations on regional and religious issues. The two working groups made certain recommendations, which were discussed at length during the workshop. Some of the agreements reached by the participants of the workshop include the following:

- There are serious regional and religious issues between the three regions, which need to be addressed in a constructive way; there is a need to understand each other's perspectives and address both, real and perceived grievances.



- Commissions should be set up and studies undertaken to enquire into the problems of refugees, migrants and the internally displaced. This is important given the significant mistrust regarding what has happened in the last two decades vis-à-vis the movement of populations. It is essential to have independent studies on these issues, with a view to publish white papers on what has actually happened. These commissions/studies should be impartial, comprising people from all regions and submit a white paper on the issues. Independent research organizations could commission such studies with inputs from all three regions of J&K.
- Governance must be taken down to the grassroots level and political decentralization should take place through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). One of the major challenges to effective governance in J&K is the question of decentralization. Projects implemented by the State and Union governments are caught up in State capitals—Jammu and Srinagar. They seldom reach the district headquarters in all the three regions. Even if they do, they never move beyond the district headquarters. Effective implementation of PRIs is the only way to ensure that the decentralization process reaches the grassroots level in the far-flung areas of J&K.
- Besides the effective implementation of

PRIs, the working of the Hill Councils in Leh and Kargil should be studied closely to find out whether these models could address the growing alienation between regions, by empowering people at the grassroots level. There has been a growing demand for regional councils in Doda and Rajouri/Poonch regions. Despite their several problems, the Hill Councils in Leh and Kargil are important models of governance, that could become effective in the Doda and Pir Panjal regions.

- There exist serious grievances — real and perceived, along regional and religious lines. Irrespective of whether they are real or imagined however, there is a need to first, create awareness and an understanding of each other's sentiments as a means to promote peace and tolerance within the state. Second, besides creating awareness, there is a need to initiate a debate at two levels — between and within the communities. Such a debate should not only be aimed at seeking to understand the other's grievances, but must also attempt to find common ground and understanding.
- In addition to the debate between the communities, debates within each community are equally important. Unfortunately, in recent years, the debate has been inward-looking, as was seen

during recent controversies such as the Amarnath land transfer and new Central University for J&K. There is a need for communities to strive to arrive at a consensus within themselves as also to be cognizant of the sensitivities and grievances of others.

- Recent years have also witnessed an enormous and increasing strain on Sufi Islam in J&K, which until now has remained the bedrock of peace and tranquility in the state, ensuring harmony both, within and between communities. The revival of Sufism should therefore, be encouraged, to dilute radical elements.
- As part of the endeavor to promote communal harmony and peace, there is a need to strengthen institutions, such as shrines, across the three regions which welcome devotees from all faiths. For example, the shrine of Baba Ghulam Shah in Shahadra near Rajouri is a symbol of harmony; people from different regions and faiths, not only from J&K, but also from outside visit this shrine. Such institutions should be encouraged.
- There are numerous apprehensions regarding the safety and maintenance of places of worship, especially in Kashmir Valley. Kashmiri Pandits, living outside the Valley for instance, fear the desecration or occupation of their temples. On the other hand, the Kashmiris feel that the local civil society has taken extra care of these places of worship and that the fear of the Pandits are exaggerated. Many in the Valley would welcome an independent study on this issue, to ensure that these fears which are exaggerated or motivated may be addressed.
- Lack of connectivity has been the major factor in keeping the regions divided — physically and psychologically. Measures to improve infrastructure to promote connectivity and mobility between regions should be undertaken. Unless there is a physical movement of people, especially students, media, and the business



community, the regions are likely to remain divided.

- Besides improved connectivity between the regions, there is also a need to improve connectivity within the regions. Gurez in Kashmir Valley; Doda, Rajouri and Poonch in Jammu region; and Batalik, Nyoma and Turtuk in Ladakh, remain on the peripheries. For the people, traveling within their regions, even to the capital cities of Srinagar, Jammu and Leh, is a major challenge. Even the district headquarters in many of the border districts lack basic facilities of accommodation, transport, boarding and lodging. Unless the border districts are physically connected with the rest of the region, and each of these regions in turn, are connected with the others in J&K, people are likely to remain disconnected not just physically, but also emotionally.
- Initiatives such as the revival of the tourism industry and other cultural activities will help in the growth of the economy and facilitate cross-regional movement. Tourism has a major role to play in not only developing the local economies, but also bridging gaps between the different regions and also with the rest of the country.
- The tourism industry in J&K needs to be revived through special packages and schemes that will help the communities to invest in addressing basic issues.
- The media as a platform to voice the concerns of the people within the three regions in a constructive manner, is also of vital importance. It has a responsibility to objectively communicate the ground realities in J&K to the other regions as also to the rest of the country.
- People must be made part of the solution and must begin to see opportunities within the several problems that confront them rather than focus their energies on the problems alone. For this to come about, the efforts of the civil society along with the government will be crucial to



prevent further radicalization and build peace among various communities and regions of J&K.

- It is imperative to promote inter-regional movement for which the youth in particular, must take the lead to participate in cross-cultural and educational programmes. Both the Universities in Jammu and Srinagar could act as nodal agencies to facilitate such interactions.
- Apart from these formal/institutional exchanges, the students could initiate informal cross-regional interactions. Students from each region could visit other regions and stay with the families of students from these areas. Both these initiatives, the student participants at the workshop believed would help build institutional and inter-personal networks thereby, weakening regional barriers.
- The regional media could provide space in each other's respective papers to highlight the several instances of communal harmony within their regions which often go unreported. As a means to counter growing religious radicalizing tendencies therefore, the regional media could publish a series of progressive stories on communal harmony within each region and highlight the significance of certain shrines in Jammu and Kashmir regions such as the Shahdra Sharief and Khir Bhavani, which could become religious centers of attraction for all faiths.

V Looking Ahead

In the days ahead, the Institute proposes to pursue the following, depending on the availability of funding support: To research and debate specific issues such as Regional Hill Councils, the Right to Information Act, decentralization, and Panchayati Raj Institutions and how these might contribute to effective governance in J&K.

Subject to the availability of funding support, this debate will be carried forward and continued among the youth on contemporary issues confronting the different regions of the state. While the first round took place in Jammu, there will be similar interactions in other centers—Srinagar and Leh, followed by regional towns, including Kargil, Doda and Rajouri.

VI Participants

The participants at the Workshop, mostly students, along with resource persons came from Delhi and the different regions of J&K representing different sections of the society.

They included the following (in alphabetical order):

Resource Persons

Prof Pirzada M Amin, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Kashmir

Mr Mohd Ashraf, Former Director, J&K Tourism

Prof Noor Ahmed Baba, Dean, School of Social Sciences, University of Kashmir

Maj Gen (retd) Dipankar Banerjee, Director, IPCS

Dr SS Bloeria, Former Chief Secretary, Govt of J&K

Mr Shujaat Bukhari, The Hindu, Srinagar

Prof PR Chari, IPCS

Mr KD Maini, Editor, *Peace*, J&K

Mr Ved Marwah, Former Governor

Prof Varun Sahni, VC, University of Jammu

Prof Dipankar Sengupta, Reader, University of Jammu

Prof P Stobdan, Senior Fellow, IDSA, New Delhi

Prof Siddiq Wahid, VC, Islamic University, Srinagar

Participants

Mr Jigmet Angchuk, Correspondent, ANI

Mr Tariq Aziz, Poonch

Mr Raja Majid Batt, Bhandarwah

Mr D Suba Chandran, Deputy Director, IPCS

Mr Rakesh Choudhary, Samba



Mr Bilal Mukhtar Dar, Baramulla

Mr Rahul Dev, Kathua

Mr Murut Dorsey, Leh

Mr Pradeep Dutta, Bureau Correspondent, *Times Now*, J&K

Mr Tsewang Gialsten, Ladakh

Dr Mehraj Hajni, Lecturer, Degree College, Bandipur

Ms Syed Kashif Hashmi, Doda

Ms Attriba Hazarika, Intern, IPCS, New Delhi

Ms Sonali Huria, Research Officer, IPCS, New Delhi

Ms Arnica Jain, Jammu

Ms Suman Karloopia, Jammu

Mr Mahesh Koul, Jammu

Mr Amin Masoodi, Correspondent, *Kashmir Times*, from Kupwara

Mr Gulam Mehdi, Turtuk

Ms Navreet Milton, Correspondent, *Kashmir Times* from Kargil

Mr Shafiq Mir, Journalist, *Indian Express* from Rajouri

Mr Tashi Morup, Journalist, Leh

Mr Shah Niwaz, Leh

Ms Anandha Pandita, Jammu

Mr Manoj Raina, Sunderbani

Mr Atul Dutt Sharma, Kishtwar

Mr Fayyaz Sheikh, Freelance Journalist, Srinagar

Mr Harpreet Singh, Jammu

Mr Sandeep Singh, Project Officer, University of Jammu

Ms Kavita Suri, Lecturer, University of Jammu

Mr Arjimand H Talib, Columnist, *Kashmir Times*, Srinagar

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