

Kashmir, the Heaven on Earth

The nation was shell shocked by the tragic deaths of over a hundred youths in police firing at different parts of Kashmir in recent months. While the secessionists got an opportunity, an Indian novelist and social activist remarked, 'Kashmir has never been an integral part of India.' Coming from the mouth of a celebrity as it was, her comment hit the media. So, the subject may deserve a relook.

Those who have some idea of Indian history know that before 1947 there was no State or sovereign power holding its sway over the whole country. No part of this land was an integral part of any single state for a very long period. Small kingdoms began to rise from the time of the Buddha and Mahavira two and a half millennia back. Some of these expanded over vast areas for some time, bringing different regions under one administrative control. But each disintegrated within a rather short time, as technology did not provide for holding on to vast empires. In our times, Swami Vivekananda predicted, going by the same logic, that the British Empire would fall due to sheer weight.

The great empires of Northern India could scarcely venture beyond the Himalayan ranges or the Vindhya. Kashmir, as much as most other Himalayan regions and hills, existed as a separate political entity for long periods, just as many kingdoms of the South Indian plateau also did, though not always. Powerful emperors led victorious armies to the North Western kingdoms and to Kashmir and also penetrated deep into the South. The only systematic historical account written in ancient India, *Rājatarangini* of Kalhana, describes how Kashmir was politically connected with the rest of India time and again from the times of the *Mahabharata*. The first king of Kashmir was a relative of Jarasandha, the king of Magadha. Ashoka annexed Kashmir and founded the old city of Srinagar about 250 years before Christ and established Buddhist *Vihāras*. The Kushan dynasty also established political supremacy over the region.

Kanishka is said to have arranged a great Buddhist Council at Kundalvan near Shalimar garden, which contributed much to the *Mahāyāna* tradition. Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese scholar and pilgrim, who visited Kashmir in 631 A.D., recorded that 500 Buddhist *Bhikkhus* attended the council, which was presided over by a Kashmiri scholar, Vasumitra. Hiuen Tsang stayed in Kashmir for two years to learn *Mahāyāna* scriptures at the feet of learned men. The Kashmir Shaivism is another distinctive contribution of the region to Indian philosophy. In the words of a Western scholar: '... for upwards of two thousand years, Kashmir has been the home of Sanskrit learning and from this small valley have issued masterpieces of history, poetry, romance, fable, and philosophy. Kashmiries are justly proud of the literary glories of their land.... Some of the greatest Sanskrit scholars and poets were born and wrote in the valley and from it has issued in Sanskrit language a world famous collection of folk-lore.' The collection is *Panchatantra*.

Kashmir fell to the invading Mughal army during the reign of Akbar the Great. Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab also annexed the area for a brief period. But her union with

the rest of India was not so much political as it was cultural. *Bharatavarsha*, as an idea, existed for thousands of years, from the days of the *Purānas* and of Kalidasa. The Himalayas roughly demarcated the northern boundary, the ocean the southern. It was not a single political entity, nor the home of a homogeneous ethnic group. It was of the type of a nation, only because it had a common cultural heritage. So, it would be incorrect to equate *India* with the *Indian State*. Through the ages Kashmir, the Heaven on earth, was an integral part of *India*. The *Indian State* was born in 1947 and slowly consolidated its territory. Kashmir was annexed at the request of its king.

In keeping with Indian culture, Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims mostly lived in harmony since the spread of Islam in the valley in the fourteenth century. They shared a common social life, rejoiced with the same music and poetry, and adored the same saints. But the last few decades were different – vested interests misused the ignorance of some people to cause chaos and strife. The situation may change for the better, if we listen to Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda was charmed at the scenic beauty of Kashmir and wanted to start a permanent centre there for spiritual contemplation, a dream obstructed by the British. There he worshipped a small girl, the daughter of a Muslim boatman, as an embodiment of the Divine Mother. He never discriminated between Hindus and Muslims. He said, ‘We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of THE RELIGION, which is Oneness, so that each may choose that path that suits him best.’

This is the message of India, and this is what can lay the foundation for a united, self-conscious nation, ‘the future perfect India rising out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible’.