

# Kashmir: the secular heritage - A few good men

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THOSE who believe on either side of the India-Pakistan equation that Kashmir is a Muslim entity are sadly missing out on the contribution of Kashmiri Pandits to the limitless enrichment of the subcontinent's secular culture, chiefly of the Urdu language and the *aadaab-i-majaalis*, social etiquette, that came with it.

Recent interventions by the Indian Supreme Court's Justice Markandey Katju in a spate of landmark cases have triggered happy memories of some of his legendary Kashmiri compatriots. Recently, Justice Katju used a couplet by Faiz Ahmed Faiz to successfully encourage the Pakistan government to free an Indian prisoner who was languishing there for years. I believe he has been urged by fellow Indians to help secure the release of an aging Pakistani virologist lodged in Ajmer jail.

This week, Justice Katju played the historian. "*Hum Babar ki aulad nahin, hum log baahar ki auladein hain*," he declared in an address at Delhi's India Islamic Cultural Centre. He was discussing the scurrilous rewriting of Indian history by right-wing nationalists.

Simply translated, he was urging religious revivalists to acknowledge that far from being progenies of this or that Muslim ruler, as right-wingers allege, Indian Muslims, together with most other Indians are in fact offspring of waves of migrants. This claim is unlikely to go down well with India's revanchist ideologues.

Justice Katju said mythmaking against Muslim rulers was a post-1857 British project. It had been internalised in India over the years. Mahmud of Ghazni's destruction of the Somnath temple was stressed but not the fact that Tipu Sultan gave an annual grant to 156 Hindu temples.

He buttressed his arguments with examples quoted from D.N. Pande's History in the Service of Imperialism and said Indians were held together by a common Sanskrit-Urdu culture, which guaranteed that India would always remain secular.

Dr Pande discovered the truth about Tipu Sultan in 1928 while verifying a contention — made in a history textbook authored by Dr Har Prashad Shastri, the then head of the Sanskrit Department in Calcutta University — that during Tipu's rule 3,000 Brahmins had committed suicide to escape conversion to Islam. The only authentication Dr Shastri could provide was that the reference was contained in the Mysore Gazetteer. But the Gazetteer contained no such reference.

I should not be surprised if for his reasoned views Hindutva cohorts will hate the judge. Even less popular will be his verdict of Tuesday in which he ordered the government to be brutal if that was the only way to deal with the centuries-old tradition of honour killing of young boys and girls. Kangaroo courts across the country threaten their young ones against marrying outside their communities.

Justice Katju easily kindles memories of another Kashmiri legend of the 1960s from the Allahabad High Court. Justice Anand Narain Mullah was a major Urdu poet of Lucknow and, like many of his

fellow Brahmins from Kashmir, a witty raconteur.

In one of his humorous couplets, Justice Mullah threw a well-aimed barb at fellow leftist poets whom he found too drunk to be able to trudge the revolutionary march they canvassed support for. If I err in recalling the exact verse, readers may please correct me.

*Hangama-i-surkh inqilab humney suna to tha magar Jaam-o-suboo ke paas paas daar-o-rasan se door door* (I had heard of the revolutionary ferment of the Left/With a cup of cheer, far from the noose, they did rest) One of Justice Mullah's verses caused a menacing controversy when he became a member of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council. Self-proclaimed nationalists bayed for his blood for alleged perfidy. It seems they mistakenly or perhaps zealously regarded a verse as insulting to Indian martyrs. It goes thus:

*Khoon-i-shaheed se bhi hai qeemat mein kuchh siwa Fankaar ke qalam ki siyahi ki ek boond.* (A drop of ink is dearer on the poet's quill/Than all the blood that martyrs are made to spill)

Few Kashmiris of any hue have moved me as spontaneously as the late Hriday Nath Wanchoo. I met the genial communist turned human rights activist in Srinagar at the height of brutal violence in Kashmir in early 1990s. A bronze bust of Lenin, the only one I have seen in Kashmir, glistened under a dim lamp in his cluttered study. There he shared with me his thoughts for a Kashmir free of Indian military occupation.

To make the point, he had unsuccessfully filed a petition in the Jammu and Kashmir High Court to assert his right as a Kashmiri to travel freely across the Line of Control. A couple of months after the meeting, the soft-spoken Wanchoo was murdered. The finger of suspicion was pointed at Muslim extremists though some of his sympathisers fear the government had a role. Wanchoo's grandson, Amit, is a much-liked doctor. Popular also as a musician, he lives in Kashmir to keep his grandfather's spirit alive.

How can votaries of a Muslim Kashmir overlook the contribution of *Ratan Nath Sarshar* or *Braj Narain Chakbast* to the romance of the Urdu novel and poetry respectively? However, the train of thought triggered by Justice Markandey Katju's far-reaching fulminations would be incomplete without reference to Jawaharlal Nehru. He is controversial no doubt and largely responsible for alienating Mohammad Ali Jinnah from the mainstream of the Congress-led national movement.

However, it would be preposterous to call Nehru communal.

Who else but he could quote the acerbic Alberuni so faithfully as Nehru did in *Discovery of India*? The 11<sup>th</sup>-century chronicler was never at ease with the Muslim plunder of Hindu temples. But he also wrote of Indians: "They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-contained and stolid. They believe there is no country like theirs, no nation like theirs, no science like theirs, no religion like theirs." How did Nehru respond to the criticism? He described Alberuni's views as "probably a correct enough description of the temper of the people".

If the Kashmiris manage to keep their secular *Kashmiriyat* despite the enormous pressure by Hindu and Muslim extremists to cave in, it would be in no small measure due to the periodic interventions of a few good men who refused to relent under duress.

**by Jawed Naqvi**

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