

JAMMU & KASHMIR IN TURMOIL

Illusions being used to create Polarity

— M.M. MUNSHI

Both Srinagar and Jammu are facing a turmoil for quite some time over the Baltal land row. It is an irony of circumstances that the case for processing and transfer of land to SASB were prepared and processed by two ministers of the collation govt., both of whom belonged to PDP (Peoples Democratic Party). It is only after their recommendation the proposal was approved by the cabinet and necessary orders for the transfer of land to shrine board were issued. Initially there was no hitch from any political party and Kazi Afzal the forest minister gave a statement that all norms including the directives of the Supreme Court were followed. The seed of the present turmoil were sown much earlier than the issue of the orders for transfer of 800 kanals of land to SASB by Arjmand Hussain Talib by writing the article "Making of Amarnath Nagar Besides an environment of disaster, another middle east will be born". The article was very provocative and painted the history of Amarnath Cave Shrine in a distorted way. Syed Ali Gelani of the Hurriat who is always ready with anti India tirades raised a wolf's cry against the transfer of land to SASB quoting the contents of Talib's article. That transfer of land to SASB will result in, degradation of the environment of the hilly areas and forests around Baltal will be destroyed, wildlife will be disturbed, and demography i.e. Muslim majority character of the valley will be polluted by settling hindus outsiders at Baltal. etc. Umar Farook the chairman of the Hurriat also joined Gelani in the tirade against the allotment of land to SABS.

The PDP as well as NC (National Conference) were feeling very jealous of the growing popularity of Ghulam Nabi Azad the congress chief minister of the collation govt., who had carried out a lot to development work in the state after getting generous financial aid from the centre, implementing long pending Wazir Commission report by creating new districts both in Jammu as well as Kashmir,

opening of new colleges, new campus's of universities new hospitals and improving and upgrading the existing ones and building of new roads and widening of older ones construction of Haj House at Srinagar and Amarnath Yastri Bhawan at Jammu, tulip gardens etc. etc. The collation partner PDP and to some what lesser extent the opposition NC (National conference) were somewhat uneasy about the ensuing election for the legislative assembly due in October 08. PDP used the allotment of land as an election gimmick, suddenly made a U turn, withdrew support to the chief minister Azad joined the separatists in their communal agenda protesting against the allotment of land to SASB aroused religious passions to increase their vote bank. National Conference at first hesitated but later felt that their vote bank in the valley was being backed by PDP also raised the banner of tirade against the land transfer, made inflammatory speeches. Dr Farooq Abdullah declared if he was elected to form the new govt in the state he would cancel the transfer order of the said land. Both PDP, NC as well as separatists forgot their differences, rivalry and organized massive demonstrations at Srinagar and other major towns in the valley. Chief Minister Azad at first stood very firm till the outgoing governor Lt Gen (retd) S.K. Sinha was replaced by N.N. Vohra. Things began to take an ugly turn especially when the latter (as ex-officio chairman of the Shrine board) unilaterally, without consulting members of the board, wrote to the chief minister that the said land is not required by SASB if the state govt could take the responsibility of looking after the facilities for pilgrims. The chief minister, under pressure from the Governor, and New Delhi yielded and cancelled the order of allotment. It is said that the centre exerted pressure on the chief minister at the advice of valley based senior congress leader. It is also told by a local congressman requesting anonymity that a senior congress leader of

Jammu assured the CM Azad there will be no reaction in Jammu if the allotment of land to SASB at Baltal is canceled. As anybody can surmise, the Hindus in general and particularly the Jammuites and Kashmiri Pandit migrants cutting across the party affiliations felt let down. Both surmised that their religious sentiments have been ignored and government has surrendered before the separatists and Islamic fundamentalists. On the other side of Pir Panjal separatists, and others started celebrating the cancellation of allotment of the land to SASB, made inflammatory and provocative speeches against Jammu people calling them communal and fascists with the result that suddenly a mass moment against the government surfaced in Jammu, Samba, Kathua, Udhampur and other districts of the Jammu division. The local congress leaders of Jammu were dumb founded and had no choice but to keep mum. Centre was busy with the confidence vote for Nuclear deal and Jammu situation was not a priority for it. The irrelevant reference to the SASB land at Baltal by Omar Abdullah in Lok Sabha during the debate on nuclear deal was the last straw and Jammu erupted like a volcano.

The experience of the governor, in dealing with Kashmir affairs, since the days of NDA government at the centre, seems to have been restricted only to holding parleys with the separatists in the valley. He made the mistake of taking Jammu for granted which boomeranged on him. He tried to suppress the moment with all the means available with and made available to him. Police CRPF, RAF, and other para military forces were deployed in great strength but protest's and violence continued unabated Former Chief minister Farooq Abdullah and PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti were not allowed to come out from the Jammu Airport for about 4 hours. When Police and para military forces failed to control the situation the Governor called Army's help to suppress the agitation. Unheard severe repressive measures exceeding those of the emergency (1975-77) were used like blocking of streets and entries and exits of the Jammu city and other towns with barbed wire, sealing of private news channels, suspension of SMS services from

mobile phones. It is said that army was called with a cunning idea as Jammuites who have got great regard for the army and would not confront it as they confronted police and para military forces. Had the former Governor Lt. Gen. (retd) SK Sinha been allowed to continue for some time he would not have surrendered the land as chairman of the SABS immediately after having asked for it and neither there would have been so much of rucks at Srinagar. The separatists certainly wanted to unnerve the new Governor in which they fairly succeeded. The strength of the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) in the legislative assembly during the previous election was that reduced to a single MLA for Nagrota Constituency. The reason for the same being that the BJP in Jammu was sacrificed by their party high command for support of the National conference to NDA Govt. at the centre. To gain their strength in the coming elections they also exploited the situation to the hilt for which they need not be blamed as any other party under similar circumstances would have done the same as both PDP and NC raced against each other in high-jacking the Hurriyat's agenda. The result was that the popularity of the congress was completely eroded on both sides of the Pir Panjal.

The separatists of Hurriyat, PDP and others have to educate themselves that the land at Baltal was requested by the SASB for arranging prefabricated shelters toilets etc for pilgrims for a couple of months each season and not for settling outsiders at the place which is not possible as the height of Baltal is about 10,000 feet above the mean sea level, it receives very heavy snow fall during the winter attaining a thickness of about 25 to 40 feet by natural snowfall, snow creeps, avalanches and drift snow (fresh snow blown by wind from higher slopes) The highest habited permanent villages in the valley on an average do not exceed 7500 feet in altitude. Even locals not to speak of outsiders can live at Baltal for more than a few months of summer. It is not understood as to how the shrine board would have settled outsiders at Baltal and how the culture of Kashmir could have got polluted or eroded.

The number of pilgrims to Amarnathji Shrine is gradually increasing and for the last

decade from few thousand to more than 4 lacs per year. Vaishno Devi Shrine managed by the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board is visited almost every year by about 75 to 80 lacks of Pilgrims but no environmental or ecological degradation of the hills/forests has taken place, nor a single outsider has permanently settled at or around Katra How can environmental or ecological degradation of the area around Baltal Amarnath area take place which has limited season which has been visited by less than 5 lack pilgrims each year, for a limited period of two months.

Regarding disturbance to wild life the moment of pilgrims to Amarnathji is restricted strictly to a narrow track while proceeding from the road head to the shrine and back to road head as such wild life gets least disturbed that too for a maximum period of about two months each season. On the contrary the wild life especially at high altitudes is disturbed much more by the shepherds mostly Bakarwals and Pehals (Kashmiri Shepherds) and Gadis who roam all over the hills with their flocks below as well as above the tree line and to a lesser extent by Gujjars at lower altitudes.

Kashmir for ages was known for its communal harmony, religious tolerance and Sufiism/Reshi cult. Two to three households of Kashmiri Pandits with several hundred households of Kashmiri Muslims used to reside in innumerable village without any problem or fear and have very amicable relations among themselves. That was the real **KASHMIRIAT** based on composite culture but unfortunately that concept has vanished today. The meaning of Kashmiriat has also seems to have changed to Islamic fundamentalism.

It is very unfortunate and ridiculous on the part of the state administration under Governor's rule not to allow a group of about 150 muslims from all parts of the country under the banner of Rastarvadi Muslim Morcha to enter the state who were bringing the message "PAIGAM AMAN" message of peace to the trouble torn state. It is open secret as to how much forest land several times that of the Baltal land has been transferred to other projects/agencies to some free of cost and even grabbed

by influential persons on both sides of the Pir Panjal without anybody raising hue and cry.

Coming back to the situation at Jammu it was expected that the talks between Shri Amarnath Yatra Sangarsh Samiti (SAYSS) and the central delegation of 18 leaders led by the union home minister would be inconclusive. SAYSS had forewarned the Central Govt. that they would not discuss anything if Farooq Abdullah, Mehbooba Mufti and Saifudin Soz would be there. They did not give up that stand till these three leaders were eased out of the meeting at Jammu. But it is curious to note from the media reports that SAYSS had not forewarned similar action if Azad attended the meeting.

It has been repeatedly clarified by the SAYSS, Administration, Corps Commanders of the Army that there was no blockade on the National Highway between Jammu and Kashmir. Whatever little disruption of the traffic took place was due to shut downs/bands in towns and major villages along the National Highway and not any blockades. The separatists and PDP refused to listen to reason, raised the bogey of so called economic blockades and created illusions for the common people and organized march to Muzzafrabad with fruit trucks when on the same day and even earlier hundreds of trucks were moving both ways on the highway. The action of organizing the March to POK resulting in loss of innocent lives is nothing short of a political blackmail.

It may not be out of place to mention here that the majority Community, mainstream political parties and others who are raising so much of noise about sufferings of the majority, human rights and other things owe an explanation : why they looked to the other side when three lac Kashmiri Pandits were hounded out of their homes in 1989-90 ?

CN IBN news channel is rightly depicting the situation in the state of J&K. Central govt. and the people of the valley will have to use their conscience and act before it is too late. Hats off to Jammu Muslims, Gujjars and two N.C leaders namely Kitchlu and Akhooon who supported the allotment of land at Baltal to SAAB.