

Ladakh revisited

November 12, 2003

Last week two news items saddened me beyond words. Though different in nature the source of both was Jammu & Kashmir.

The first one is a comment attributed to the Hurriyat leader Yaseen Malik. The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) had taken the long-awaited initiative for the return of Kashmiri Pandits to the Valley. A Committee visited the State last month and interacted with migrants, separatists and local leaders to "create a conducive atmosphere" for the Pandits' homecoming.

During his interaction with the Committee, Malik conveyed an 'advice': if the Pandits wanted to return *"they should remain neutral in the ongoing struggle, and lead a normal, peaceful life without involving themselves on either side."*

The Kashmiri Pandit Conference president H N Jattu immediately responded: *"This advice amounts to asking us to live the life of second class citizens and do whatever they ask us to."*

Coming from a group which pretends to speak of self-determination and freedom, this anti-democratic remark is astonishing to say the least. One can imagine what will happen if the State of Jammu and Kashmir was to come under the leadership of the Maliks and alikes.

The second news is related to the northern most region of J&K. The Rev. Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, head Lama of Ladakh passed away in Delhi at the age of 86.

The gentle and humble monk possibly represents all the Indian qualities that the Hurriyats will never embody.

During a visit to Ladakh in summer 1949, Nehru had requested the young Lama to join politics. He convinced him that it would be the best way to help his people. From that time till his last breath the Lama worked not only for welfare of the

Ladakhis but also for the integration of the region to the rest of India and this despite the most difficult political environment.

The monk, acknowledged by the Ladakhis as the reincarnation of Arhat Bakula one of the 16 Great Ahrats, once admitted that *“involvement in public affairs did affect my own spiritual practice and advancement. In fact, I feel happy that I could be of assistance to my people. I have no regrets about this.”*

He always liked to quote the Buddhist sage Shantidava: *“For as long as peace endures and for as long as living beings remain, until then may I too abide to dispel the misery of the world.”*

Since independence, the J&K State has been governed by Muslim leaders from Srinagar who have scant respect and interest for the people of Jammu and Ladakh.

During his fifty years of public life, whether as a MLA or a Minister in Srinagar, or later as a MP or the Chairman of the NMC or even as the Indian Ambassador to Mongolia, Bakula strove to bring Ladakh closer to India.

Ladakh could have taken a different direction. During the Prime Minister’s visit to Leh in 1949, Cheewang Rigzin, the President of Buddhist Association of Ladakh, presented a memorandum to Nehru. He made four proposals on behalf of the people of Ladakh. One was, *“we should be permitted to re-unite politically with Tibet of which land we form part and parcel for all purpose but political.”* The others were: Ladakh should govern itself through a separate “legislative and administrative machinery”; or have a “homeland amalgamated with the Hindu-majority parts of Jammu” or join with East Punjab.

Delhi and Srinagar never accepted any of these proposals but thanks to the diplomatic, administrative and human qualities of Kushok Bakula, Ladakh could progressively join the nation’s mainstream without too much disturbance. Though till today the demand for a Union Territory status remains justly alive, Bakula felt that it was his swadharma to see that the transition between the old traditional Buddhist province and modern India happened smoothly. Despite all the obstacles and difficulties, he did it in his gentle and patient way.

It is worth mentioning the heavy price paid by the Ladakhis during 4 wars India has fought (3 with Pakistan and in 1962 with China) and more recently during the Kargil conflict. How to forget that the Nubra Guards and later the Ladakh Scouts covered themselves with glory to protect India's borders and this with the Monk's blessings!

It was also Bakula who wrote to Nehru in April 1962 to inform him of the impending attack on Ladakh? Through traders and pilgrims, he had gathered accurate information on the massive build up of the Chinese troops in Western Tibet. Though a Buddhist, the Kushok always considered the defense of the nation's borders before his own faith.

These two stories highlight the real tragedy of 'Kashmir'. In fact, there is no such a thing as 'Kashmir'. There is a State of J&K consisting of the Valley, the regions of Ladakh, Jammu, Baltistan, Gilgit and the so-called Azad Kashmir, but no 'Kashmir' as such. Further more, the Valley only represents 6,000 sq miles out of the 84,000 sq miles of the State, so one should not equate the State with the Valley.

It is to the merit of Karan Singh, the former Sardar-i-Riyasat, to have repeatedly pointed out: *"A common mistake is to use the word 'Kashmir'; as a shorthand for the multiregional J & K state and then to proceed politically on that basis"*.

Even today, too much importance is given to a few in the Valley who are allowed to dictate the agenda for J & K just because they are vociferous and threatening. It is distressing that those who have always defended India in her hours of need should be forced to remain second-class citizens and 'neutral' when the Hurriyats should be dictating the terms.

Recently the US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld advised the Palestinians to follow Gandhi's example. One can hope that in the forthcoming talks with the Hurriyats, the Deputy Prime Minister will advise them to follow Bakula's path.

And let us pray that the reincarnation of the Rinpoche of Ladakh will see his dream of a genuine autonomy for his region and its greater integration in the Union of India, become a reality.