

SRINAGAR and Jammu had faced turmoil over the Baltal land row. It is an irony of circumstances that the case for processing and transfer of land to Shri Amarnath Shrine Board was prepared and processed by two ministers of the coalition government, both of whom belonged to the PDP (Peoples Democratic Party). It was only after their recommendation that the proposal was approved by the Cabinet and necessary orders for the transfer of land to the 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 seeds of the present turmoil were sown much earlier than the issue of the orders for transfer of 80 kanals of land to the SASB by Mr. Arjmand Hussain Talib by writing the article "Making of Amarnath Nagar. In that he said: 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 Hurriyat, who is always ready with anti-India tirades, raised a wolf's cry against the transfer of land quoting the contents of Talib's article. He remarked that the transfer of land will result in degradation of the environment of the hilly areas, 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 outsider Hindus at Baltal, etc. Umar Farooq the Chairman of the Hurriyat also joined Geelani in the tirade

against the allotment of land.

The PDP, as well as the NC (National Conference), were feeling jealous of the growing popularity of Ghulam Nabi Azad, the Congress Chief Minister of the coalition government, who had carried out a lot of development work in the state after getting generous financial aid from the Centre, by implementing long-pending Wazir Commission report by creating new districts, both in Jammu as well as Kashmir, opening of new colleges, new campuses 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. The coalition partner PDP and to somewhat lesser extent the opposition National Conference were somewhat uneasy about the ensuing elections for the Legislative Assembly due in coming October. The PDP used the allotment of land as an election gimmick, suddenly made a U turn, withdrew support to Chief Minister Azad, joined the separatists in their communal agenda, protesting against the allotment of land, aroused religious passions to increase their vote bank. The National Conference, at first, hesitated but later felt that their vote bank in the Valley was being hijacked by the PDP, also, raised the banner of tirade against the land transfer and made inflammatory speeches. Dr Farooq Abdullah declared that if he was elected to form the new government in the state he would cancel the transfer order of the said land. The PDP and the N.C 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 firm till outgoing governor Lt. Gen S.K.Sinha (retd) was replaced by N.N.Vohra and things began to take an ugly turn especially when the latter (as the 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 the SASB and whether the state government 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 a Valley-based senior Congress Leader. It was also told by a local Congressmen, requesting anonymity, that a senior Congress leader of Jammu assured CM Azad that there will be no reaction in Jammu if the allotment of land is cancelled. Hindus in general, and particularly the Jammuites and Kashmiri Pandit migrants, cutting across party affiliations, felt let down. Both surmised that their religious sentiments had been ignored and the Government had surrendered before the separatists and Islamic fundamentalists. On the other side of Pir Panjal separatists, and others started celebrating the cancellation order, made inflammatory and provocative speeches against the Jammu people calling them communal and fascists with the result that suddenly a mass movement 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. The Centre was busy with the

confidence vote for the nuclear deal and the 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 the Kashmir affairs since the days of the NDA Government at the Centre seems to have been restricted to holding parleys with the separatists in the Valley. He made the mistake of taking Jammu for granted and this boomeranged on him. He tried to suppress the movement with all the available means. Police, CRPF, and other paramilitary forces were deployed in great strength but protests, continued unabated. Former Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah and PDP Chief Mehbooba Mufti were not allowed to come out from the Jammu Airport for about four hours. When police and paramilitary forces failed to control the situation, the Governor called the Army's help to suppress the agitation. 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 and suspension of SMS services from mobile phones. It is said that the army was called with a cunning idea as Jammuites, who have a great regard for the army, would not confront it as they confronted police and paramilitary forces. Had the former Governor Lt.Gen. S.K.Sinha (retd.) been allowed to continue for some time more he would not have surrendered the land as chairman of the SABS immediately after having asked for it. Neither would there have been so much of ruckus at Srinagar. The separatists wanted to

unnerve the new Governor in which they fairly succeeded.

The strength of the Bharatia Janata Party in the Legislative Assembly, during the previous election, was reduced to a single MLA of the Nagrota Constituency. The reason for this being that the BJP in Jammu was sacrificed by their party high command for support of the National Conference to the NDA Government 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 the PDP and the NC raced against each other in highjacking the Hurriyat's agenda. The result was that the popularity of the Congress eroded on both sides of the Pir Panjal.

Separatists of the Hurriyat, the 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 far settling outsiders at the place which is not possible as the height of Baltal is about 10,000 feet above the sea level. It receives 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 habitated 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 the Amarnathji shrine is gradually increasing and for the last decade from a few thousands to more than 4 lakhs per year. The Vashnov Devi shrine, managed by the Mata Vashionv Devi Shrine Board, is visited every year by about 75 to 80 lacks of Pilgrims but no environmental or ecological degradation of the hills/forests has taken place, nor has a single outsider permanently settled at or around Katra. How can environmental or ecological degradation of the area around Baltal area take place which has a limited season and which has been visited by less than 5 lakh pilgrims each year, for a limited period of two months.

Regarding disturbance to wild life the movement of pilgrims to Amarnathji is restricted strictly to a narrow track while proceeding from the roadhead to the shrine and back to roadhead. As such wild life gets least disturbed. 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 Gujars at lower altitudes.

Kashmir, for ages, was known for its communal harmony, religious tolerance and Sufii/ Reshi cult. Two or three households of Kashmiri Pandits, with several hundred households of Kashmiri Muslims, used to reside in many villages without any problem or fear and have very amicable relations among themselves. That was the real Kashmiriat based on a composite culture. The meaning of Kashmiriat also seems to have changed to Islamic fundamentalism.

It is very unfortunate and ridiculous on the part of the state administration under the

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. They were bringing the message "PAIGAM AMAN" — message of peace — to the trouble-torn state.

It is an open secret that forest land near Baltal has been transferred to other projects/agencies and to some free of cost. It has even been grabbed by influential persons on both sides of the Pir Panjal without anybody raising a hue and cry.

It has been repeatedly cleared by the SAYSS, the Administration and the Corps Commander of the Army that there was no blockade on the National Highway between Jammu and Kashmir. Whatever disruption took place was due to

shutdowns/bands in towns and major villages and not blockades. The separatists refused to listen to reason and created illusions for the common people and organized a march to Muzzafrabad with a few fruit trucks when on the same day and even earlier hundreds of trucks were moving both ways on the highway. Organizing the march to POK, resulting in loss of innocent lives, is nothing short of political blackmail.

Hats off to Jammu Muslims, Gujjars and two N.C leaders namely Kitchlu and Akhoon who supported the allotment of land at Balatal to SASB.

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