Politics in the States (II): West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir

West Bengal presents the case of a Communist government that came to power through the parliamentary process and has functioned according to the rules of a democratic and civil libertarian polity and under conditions of a capitalist economy, though with the presence of a strong public sector. This government has ruled the state for nearly thirty-seven years, winning five state elections so far in a row, and given people on the whole an effective, reformist government.

The Congress government in Bengal had not performed badly till the early 1960s. Despite dislocation and disruption of the economy due to the partition of Bengal and the refugee influx of over 4 million coming from East Bengal till 1965, the government had been able to provide economic stability. West Bengal had maintained its position for industry in the hierarchy of states. There was marked progress in the public health programme, electricity generation and road construction. The government, however, had failed on two major fronts: unemployment among the educated and the rural landless grew continuously, and, while the zamindari system had been abolished, the power of the intermediary jotedars and landlords over sharecroppers and tenants was not curbed.

Political Mobilization and the CPI/CPM

Since 1930 the Communist party had enjoyed significant support among intellectuals and workers in Calcutta, and it emerged as a major political force in Bengal by 1947. The united CPI in the 1950s and CPM in the 1960s and 1970s organized a large number of mass movements and trade union struggles, including gheraos during 1967–69, and combined them with an effective use of the legislature to 'expose the government's misdeeds'. As a result there was a steady growth of the united CPI and later the CPM, both electorally and organizationally. Congress was defeated in the state elections of 1967 and 1969 and United Front governments led by breakaway groups from Congress and with CPM participation were formed. Both United Front governments broke up because of internal contradictions but they added to the CPM's popularity. During these years the CPM was also able to organize massive agrarian movements of tenants and sharecroppers and thus extend its political base to rural areas.

During the decade of 1967–77, West Bengal witnessed increasing violence and chaos, a crisis of governability, heightened factionalism and splits in Congress, which ruled the state directly or through President's Rule from 1969 to 1977. Unprecedented levels of state repression were especially directed against the Naxalites and the movements of the rural poor. In the end the CPM's popularity, combined with the mass reaction against the Emergency, was transformed into an electoral victory in 1977, and the CPM, along with its left allies, was able to form the government. Since then the CPM has further consolidated its power and entrenched itself, especially among the peasantry. It has succeeded in maintaining the left coalition as well as control of the government during the last thirty years, and through seven assembly elections.

CPM: Record of Successes

Two significant achievements of the CPM are worthy of analysis, in terms of improving the conditions of the rural poor. The first one has been in the field of land reform or rather tenancy reform. Though the Congress government had done away with the zamindari system in the 1950s it had allowed two aberrations: jotedars (intermediaries for rent collection between zamindars and sharecroppers who were the actual cultivators) were permitted to stay, and many large landowners allowed to retain above-ceiling land through benami transactions.

After coming to power the CPM launched the programme called 'Operation Barga' which reformed the tenancy system in the interests of the bargadars (sharecroppers), who constituted nearly 25 per cent of the rural households. For decades, sharecroppers had suffered from the two ills of (1) insecurity of tenure, for their tenancy was not registered, though law provided for permanency of tenure, and (2) high, illegal levels of the share of the crops they had to give to jotedars as rent. Through Operation Barga, which included politicization and mobilization of sharecroppers by the party and peasant organizations, the government secured legal registration of sharecroppers, thus giving them permanent lease of the land they cultivated and security of tenure, and enforced laws regarding the share of the produce they could retain, thus improving their income.

The decision to drastically reform the jotedari system in the interests of the sharecroppers but not end it in toto was a brilliant political tactic. Jotedars were of all sizes. The small and middle-sized jotedars were large in number. Moreover, many of them were simultaneously cultivators on their own land as rich and middle peasants. Some of them were petty shopkeepers in villages, or teachers, clerks, chaprasis, etc., in towns and cities. As such, in terms of both socio-political power and electoral clout and the interests of increased agricultural production they mattered—they could not be totally antagonized. Their economic power and income could be limited by reducing their crop share and giving permanency of tenure to sharecroppers, but their rent share and therefore income and ownership of land could not be completely abolished. After all, elections can be won only by a broad coalition, i.e., on the basis of broad-based political support, which would have to include, and at least not permanently and completely alienate, a significant section of rural society, consisting of small jotedars, who also happened to be rich and middle peasants and small shopkeepers. This strata was, moreover, capable of politically influencing and mobilizing a large number of small peasants and the rural and urban lower-middle classes. The party therefore treated only the large and absentee landowners as permanent 'class enemies'.

Significantly, reform of the jotedari system provided the incentive to all concerned to increase production. It became a contributory factor in the ushering in of the Green Revolution and multi-cropping, leading to increase in income of both sharecroppers and jotedars. It also enabled those jotedars who were cultivators to concentrate on increasing production.

For political and administrative reasons, the CPM government took up the tasks of unearthing benami above-ceiling land and its distribution to the landless with great caution, spread over several years, lest the rich peasants went over *en bloc* to the Opposition. The government supplemented tenancy and land reform measures with programmes for providing cheap credit to

sharecroppers and small peasants, saving them in the bargain from the clutches of moneylenders. The Congress government at the Centre had evolved several schemes for providing subsidized low-interest loans through nationalized and cooperative banks to peasants and specially to landless labourers and small peasants for investment in Green Revolution technologies. The West Bengal government was one of the few state governments which successfully implemented these schemes with the help of panchayats and party and peasants' organizations.

The second major achievement of the West Bengal government has been its restructuring and transformation of the Panchayati Raj institutions, through which the rural poor, the middle peasants and the rural intelligentsia were empowered, or enabled to share in political power at the local level.

The Panchayati Raj experiment of the 1960s had failed in West Bengal as also in the whole of India because of the domination of its village, taluka and district institutions by the economically or socially privileged sections of rural society and by the local and district bureaucracy. It had yielded no benefits to weaker sections.

The CPM government and the party ousted the large landowners and other dominant social groups from the Panchayati Raj institutions—district-level zilla parishads, block-level panchayati samitis and village-level gram panchayats—involved the rural lower and lower-middle classes, teachers, and social and political workers, brought the bureaucracy under their control, and strengthened their authority and financial resources.

In addition, the CPM government took several other steps to improve the social condition of the landless. Its record of implementing centrally financed anti-poverty and employment generating schemes was not unblemished but was better than that of other states. The 'Food for Work' programme in particular was implemented effectively to generate jobs for the landless. Moreover, the West Bengal government took up projects such as road construction, drainage and cleaning of irrigation channels and village tanks which were meaningful from the point of view of the lower classes in the villages and tried to implement them through the reformed Panchayati Raj institutions so that the opportunities for corruption were drastically reduced.

The CPM also speeded up the organization of agricultural labourers and regularly organized mass struggle for higher wages. Interestingly, rather than concentrate on taking away land from rich peasants and distributing it among agricultural labourers and thus equalizing landownership, the CPM concentrated on enhancing the latter's capacity to struggle for higher wages. The success of the Green Revolution strategy and multi-cropping also resulted in greater employment as well as increase in wages in the countryside throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

The CPM government's record in containing communal violence has been one of the best in the country. Despite having a high ratio of Muslims in the population and the large influx of Hindu refugees from East Bengal, West Bengal remained relatively free of communal violence. In 1984, it successfully contained the communal fallout of Indira Gandhi's assassination and in December 1992 of the Babri Mosque's demolition. The CPM also did not permit the growth of casteism and caste violence in West Bengal.

In 1986, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) organized, under the leadership of

Subhash Gheising, a militant, often violent, agitation in the hill district of Darjeeling in West Bengal around the demand for a separate Gorkha state. Following negotiations between GNLF and the central and state governments, a tripartite accord was signed in Calcutta in August 1988, under which the semi-autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, within the state of West Bengal, came into being. The Council had wide control over finance, education, health, agriculture and economic development.

Overall, the CPM has succeeded in giving West Bengal a moderately effective and on the whole non-corrupt, and relatively violence-free government, especially in rural areas. It has also held its alliance with other smaller left parties, i.e., the CPI, the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Forward Bloc. The worst of poverty and naked oppression by the dominant classes in rural areas has been mitigated in some measure. The CPM has also successfully checked and even reversed the role of the police and lower bureaucracy as the tools of the rural rich and as the oppressors and exploiters of the rural poor. The support of the rural poor is the reason why the party has remained in power in West Bengal for as long as it has.

Problem Areas

The urban sector and the field of industrial development have emerged as the vulnerable areas of the CPM government. Unlike in the countryside, it has been unable to find suitable structures or forms to work properly the institutions through which civic problems could be solved and the urban people involved in civic affairs. There has been no replica of Panchayati Raj in the cities. Before 1977, the CPM had organized struggles of urban citizens for higher wages and salaries and cheaper urban facilities such as transport. These struggles could obviously not continue for long under a CPM administration. Consequently, the deterioration in urban infrastructural facilities as well as in the quality of life that began under Congress rule has continued under CPM rule in most of West Bengal's towns and cities.

But the most important failing of the CPM government has been the inability to develop industry and trade because of the absence of any theory or strategy of economic development, of industrialization, of large-scale creation of jobs in a situation where a state is ruled by a Communist party while the country as a whole is not. There can be no removal of poverty, or long-term improvement in the living conditions of the mass of rural landless, or large-scale redistribution of wealth, or a meaningful dent in the burgeoning urban and rural unemployment without rapid industrialization and significant overall economic development and the resultant creation of jobs in industry, trade and services.

This is particularly true of West Bengal where the landless and marginal farmers constitute nearly half the rural population who cannot be absorbed on any significant scale in agriculture. But how can this economic development be integrated with the socialist orientation of the government and the ruling party? The CPM did not even undertake to find an answer to this pressing issue, what to speak of taking up the task.

Large-scale flight of capital from West Bengal had taken place during 1967–75 as a result of near-total administrative anarchy, gheraos and bandhs and labour militancy. After coming to

power in 1977, the CPM did try to deal with the problem of capitalist investment in the state in a pragmatic manner. It began to restrain labour militancy, so much so that in a few years West Bengal came to have more industrial peace than most other parts of the country. West Bengal under the CPM displayed one of the best records in the maintenance of law and order. The CPM no longer threatened property owners; on the contrary the government began offering numerous incentives to capitalists, both Indian and foreign, to invest in West Bengal. But the capitalists did not respond and were not inclined to come back to West Bengal and to make fresh investments there in the field of industrial activity.

An important reason for the capitalists' staying away from the state has been the lack of a work culture and accountability, a malaise that has been difficult to cure. The real problem, however, has been that potential investors are not willing to trust a Communist government and a Communist party. Most of them believe that the leopard can disguise its spots but not change its nature. The problem is intractable and the party's dilemma is inherent in a situation where it is committed to the abolition of capitalism, however gradually, and has acquired partial and limited power in a state of the Union. This difficulty could have been foreseen.

The CPM, however, failed to take cognizance of the problem and look for innovative solutions suited to the circumstances in which the party was ruling in West Bengal. This was in part because the party assumed that its rule would not last long, as it would be overthrown by the central government. The party would, therefore, use its short-lived power to 'unleash' popular, revolutionary forces by freeing them from the fear of police and bureaucracy, hold the fort in West Bengal and Kerala for a short period and wait for the rest of India to catch up with them. Social development in general, and economic development in particular, would have to wait till an all-India revolution took place. As Jyoti Basu, chief minister of West Bengal put it as late as 1985: 'The aim of our programmes is to alleviate the sufferings of the rural and urban people and to improve their conditions to a certain extent. We do not claim anything more, as we are aware that without structural changes in the socio-economic order it is hardly possible to bring about any basic change in the conditions of the people.'[1] In other words, social and economic development was not and could not be on the CPM agenda in West Bengal.

What the CPM did not foresee was that if, by chance, it continued to rule for decades then it would have to deal with problems of urban decay, rural poverty, and growing unemployment among the educated youth, both in cities and villages, and the rural landless. All this would require high rates of economic growth under conditions where it would not be possible to rely upon capitalists to undertake the task. The real problem has, therefore, been of the CPM's failing to evolve an alternative strategy of development on the basis of the state and cooperative sectors, aided by small and medium entrepreneurs. That it is not a problem only of West Bengal but of economic development under and by a Communist state government is borne out by similar economic stagnation in Kerala.

Perhaps, the failure to innovate theoretically and strategically goes further. The CPM has now functioned as a political party within the framework of a democratic polity and a capitalist economic system since 1964. It has held political power in West Bengal continuously since 1977 and off and on in Kerala since 1957. It also no longer looks upon parliamentary democracy as a

bourgeois ploy or the Indian constitution as a hoax to be attacked and exposed. Instead it defends the constitution, the Fundamental Rights enshrined in it, and its democratic institutions from attacks by anti-democratic forces. It only argues that the existing democracy should be further deepened both politically and socially and economically. Its political practice has been described by a sympathetic political scientist, Atul Kohli, as social democratic and reformist in orientation.[2]

In recent years, the CPM has attempted to change its industrial policies and invite, with some success, Indian and foreign capitalists to invest in West Bengal. But perhaps that is where lies the crunch. The CPM's reformism and social democratism have been pragmatic and not arrived at theoretically. The party has refused to theoretically analyse its own political practices and to then advance further on that basis.

The CPM has also failed to analyse the implications of its politics for its organizational structure and then to make innovations in this regard. Undoubtedly, its centralized and disciplined democratic-centralism party structure helped it withstand state repression, to acquire political power, and, to a certain extent, implement its agrarian policies. But, clearly, this party structure has now become a drag. It tends to promote monopolization of power by party cadre so that the people start depending on it to get everything done. Bureaucratization, patronage, privilege, abuse of power, and partisan behaviour have been taking a toll on the party and its popularity. Party cadres, panchayat leaders and trade union functionaries have started developing vested interests in the perks of power.

A basic class approach and pro-poor orientation together with a tight organizational structure enabled the CPM to come to power in West Bengal and to adopt several pro-rural-poor measures. But the government's failure to innovate theoretically and organizationally has contributed to its political stagnation. It increasingly finds itself in a Catch-22 situation. As a result of growing unemployment, failure to arrest urban decay, and develop the state, the CPM and its allied left parties have been losing support in the cities, especially Kolkata. This erosion of support is now spreading to rural areas, where the memory of Operation Barga, land reform and other ameliorative measures is beginning to recede. For several years the CPM has been winning elections mainly because of the absence of a viable alternative and the continuing loyalty of the poor. But the Opposition is being increasingly successful in gradually whittling down its support.

The future of the CPM in West Bengal is, of course, not yet foreclosed. With its wide popularity among the common people, especially among the rural poor, and a strong base in loyal and committed party workers and supporters, it has the possibility of making a theoretical and political leap forward. Only time will tell whether it does so or not. But there is no doubt that its future in West Bengal and the rest of India depends on this happening.

The Kashmir Problem

Kashmir has been an intractable problem so far as Indo-Pak relations are concerned. It has also posed a constant internal problem for India with forces of integration with India and secession from it being in continuous struggle.

An overriding factor in the situation is that Kashmir has become over the years a symbol as well as a test of India's secularism. If in 1947 Kashmir had acceded to Pakistan, Indians would have accepted the fact without being upset. But once, as a result of the invasion of Kashmir by Pathan tribesmen and Pakistani troops and the persuasion of its popular leader, Sheikh Abdullah, the state of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India, the situation became different. Pakistan claimed Kashmir on the ground that it was a Muslim-majority state. This was unacceptable to secular India, which did not accept the two-nation theory. For India the question of Kashmir became not merely one of retaining a small part of its territory; it impinged on the very basic character of the Indian state and society.

As Nehru and other Indian leaders had seen clearly, separation of Kashmir from India would pose a serious danger to Indian secularism. If Kashmir seceded from India on grounds of religion, the two-nation theory would seem to have been vindicated. It would strengthen the Hindu communal forces and pose a serious threat to millions of Muslims, whose number in India is larger than even that in Pakistan, making their position in India quite untenable. The position was grasped quite clearly by many knowledgeable non-Indians too. For example, Josef Korbel, a member of the United Nations Commission on India and Pakistan, wrote in 1954:

> The real cause of all the bitterness and bloodshed, all the venomed speech, the recalcitrance and the suspicion that have characterised the Kashmir dispute is the uncompromising and perhaps uncompromisable struggle of two ways of life, two concepts of political organisation, two scales of values, two spiritual attitudes, that find themselves locked in deadly conflict in which Kashmir has become both symbol and battleground.[3]

Immediately after Kashmir's accession in October 1947, India had offered a plebiscite under international auspices for the people of Kashmir to take a final decision on it. But there was a rider: Pakistan's troops must vacate Kashmir before a plebiscite could be held. Till the end of 1953, the Government of India was willing to abide by the results of a plebiscite if proper conditions were created for it. But a plebiscite could not be held, partly because Pakistan would not withdraw its forces from Pakistan-held Kashmir, and partly because Indo-Pak relations got enmeshed in the Cold War. During 1953–54, the United States entered into a virtual military alliance with Pakistan. This also encouraged Pakistan to take a non-conciliatory and aggressive approach based on a 'policy of hatred' and animosity.

By the end of 1956, the Indian government made it clear to Pakistan and the international community that the situation in Kashmir and Indo-Pak relations had changed so completely that its earlier offer had become absolute and Kashmir's accession to India had become a settled fact. Since then, so far as India is concerned, Kashmir has been an irrevocable part of the nation. However, without openly saying so, Nehru and his successors have been willing to accept the status quo, that is, accept the ceasefire line or Line of Control (LoC) as the permanent international border.

Special Status of Jammu and Kashmir

Under the Instrument of Accession signed in October 1947, the state of Jammu and Kashmir was granted a temporary special status in the Indian Union under Article 370 of the Indian constitution. The state ceded to the Indian Union only in defence, foreign affairs and communications, retaining autonomy in all other matters. The state was permitted to have a Constituent Assembly and a constitution of its own, to elect its own head of the state called Sadr-e-Riyasat, and to retain its own flag. Its chief minister was to be designated as prime minister. This also meant that the Indian constitution's section on Fundamental Rights did not cover the state, nor did institutions such as the Supreme Court, the Election Commission, and the Auditor-General have any jurisdiction there. However, Article 370 dealt with the relations of the state with the Centre and not with its accession to the Union, which was complete.

In 1956, the Constituent Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir ratified the accession of the state to India. Over the years, the state's special status was considerably modified—one might even say liquidated. The jurisdiction of Union institutions such as the Supreme Court, the Auditor-General and the Election Commission and the constitutional provisions regarding Fundamental Rights had extended to the state. Parliament's authority to make laws for the state and the President's authority over the state government, including the power to impose President's Rule, had also been extended. The state's services were integrated with the central and all-India services. Symbolic of the changes were that in the nomenclature of the Sadr-e-Riyasat to Governor and of the state prime minister to chief minister.

A sizeable section of Kashmiris resented this erosion of the provisions relating to the state's autonomy. On the other hand, Article 370 gave birth to a powerful movement in the Jammu region of the state for full accession to India, a greater share for Jammu in government services and even for separation of Jammu from Kashmir. The movement soon acquired communal colours with the danger of the state being divided on religious lines— Kashmir being Muslim majority and Jammu being Hindu majority. The agitation in Jammu was led by the Jammu Praja Parishad which later merged with the Jan Sangh, which raised the agitation to an all-India level. An unfortunate event was the death of Jan Sangh president Syama Prasad Mookerjee due to a heart attack in a Srinagar jail, on 23 June 1951. He had gone to the state in violation of a government order. The Praja Parishad agitation played into the hands of communal pro-Pakistan elements in Kashmir. It tarnished India's secular image and weakened India's case on Kashmir. It also unsettled Sheikh Abdullah, and made him doubt the strength of Indian secularism.

The Politics of Sheikh Abdullah

India's internal problems in regard to Kashmir began with Sheikh Abdullah, a man of remarkable courage and integrity, having a mass appeal, but who was also autocratic, wayward and arbitrary. Pressed by communal elements in the Kashmir Valley demanding merger with Pakistan and harassed by communalists in Jammu demanding full integration with India, Abdullah began to veer towards separation. Exaggerating the strength of communal forces and the weakness of secularism in India, he increasingly talked of the limited character of the accession of the state to India and of 'full' autonomy for the state. He even hinted at Kashmir's independence to be achieved with the help of the US and other foreign powers. He also began to

appeal to communal sentiments among Kashmiri Muslims. Nehru pleaded with him for sanity and restraint but with little effect. By the middle of July 1953, Abdullah publicly demanded that Kashmir should become independent. The majority of his colleagues in the cabinet and his party opposed his new political position and asked the Sadr-e-Riyasat to dismiss him on charges of 'corruption, malpractices, disruptionism and dangerous foreign contacts'. Abdullah was consequently dismissed and Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed installed as prime minister. The new government immediately put Abdullah under arrest. He, however, remained a martyr and a hero for many Kashmiris. Nehru was unhappy with the turn of events but would not interfere with the state government.

Abdullah's political career, closely interwoven with that of Kashmir's, had a chequered history from 1953 till his death in 1982. Under Nehru's pressure, he was released on 8 January 1958 but was rearrested three months later as he continued with his separatist campaign and appeals to communal sentiments.

Nehru got Abdullah released again in April 1964. Abdullah, however, continued to claim that Kashmir's accession to India was not final and that he would fight to secure for the state the right of self-determination. But since he was also against the state's merger with Pakistan, he was frontally opposed by pro-Pakistani political groups led by Moulavi Farooq and the Awami Action Committee. Abdullah was put under house arrest and again deprived of his liberty in May 1965. The restrictions on him were removed only in 1968.

Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed ruled Jammu and Kashmir with a heavy hand and with large-scale corruption and misuse of patronage and government machinery. He was succeeded by G.M. Sadiq and then by Mir Qasim, who were men of integrity but not effective administrators or skilful politicians. The state government under these leaders never acquired wide popularity, though the pro-Pakistan forces remained weak.

The Bangladesh war and the breakup of Pakistan in 1971 had a significant impact on Kashmir; the Pro-Pakistani Awami Action Committee and the secessionist Plebiscite Front suffered a severe political jolt. Abdullah now got into a better frame of mind, did some rethinking and adopted a more conciliatory approach towards the central government. Indira Gandhi, in turn, extended a hand of friendship, lifted all restrictions and opened a dialogue with him. He informally agreed not to raise the question of self-determination or plebiscite and to limit his demands to that of greater autonomy within the Indian Union. Finally, in February 1975, he once again became chief minister and the leader of the National Conference. In the July 1977 mid-term poll in the state he won hands down. His son, Farooq Abdullah, succeeded him as chief minister, on his death in 1982.

Farooq Abdullah, Insurgency and Terrorism

Since 1982 the state has either been ruled mostly by Farooq Abdullah or been under President's Rule. Farooq won a comfortable majority in the mid-term elections in June 1983; but acrimony soon developed between him and the central government. In July 1984, in a coup against Farooq, his brother-in-law, G.M. Shah, split the National Conference. Acting at the behest of the central

government, the governor, Jagmohan, dismissed Farooq as chief minister and installed G.M. Shah in his place.

G.M. Shah was both corrupt and inept and, as he failed to control communal attacks on Kashmiri Pandits, his government was dismissed in March 1986 and President's Rule imposed in the state. Subsequently, Rajiv Gandhi entered into an alliance with Farooq Abdullah for the assembly elections in early 1987. But Farooq, who won the election, was unable to manage the state politically or administratively. Thereafter, the movement for secession stepped up in the Valley. Both Hizbul Mujahideen and other fundamentalist, pro-Pakistan groups and those for independence led by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) took to violent agitations and armed insurgency. All these groups were actively financed, trained and armed by Pakistan, and carried on a campaign of murders, kidnappings and torture of political opponents and of attacks on police stations, government offices and other public buildings. They also attacked Kashmiri Pandits, most of whom were forced to leave their homes and move to refugee camps in Jammu and Delhi. To contain terrorism and insurgency, V.P. Singh at the Centre dismissed Farooq Abdullah's government, which had lost control over the Valley to the terrorist groups, and imposed President's Rule in the state. Farooq, however, made another political comeback by winning the long-delayed elections in 1996. In the 2002 state elections, he lost power and the state came to be ruled by an alliance of the People's Democratic Party, headed by Mufti Muhammed Sayeed, and the Congress party.

The all-party Hurriyat (Liberation) Conference and the JKLF which stands for Kashmir's independence and the pro-Pakistan Mujahideen have lost steam in recent years, mainly because of the Mujahideen and JKLF's terrorist depredations against the people of the state, but Pakistan-supported and organized terrorism continues to be a menace affecting normal politics in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Way Out

From the early 1950s to date, Kashmir has been bedevilled by several major ills, leading to the alienation of the people of Jammu and Kashmir from the state's rulers as also India as a whole. There has been an absence of good and sound administration; the government and its various departments have been mired in corruption and nepotism. Most elections, starting with the very first one in 1951, have been rigged and marred by electoral fraud, leading to loss of faith in the legitimacy of the electoral process and the political system as a whole among the people, who have therefore not hesitated to take recourse to extra-constitutional means. Even otherwise, democracy has functioned quite imperfectly from the beginning and politics and administration in the state have assumed an authoritarian character. With the passage of time and as Pakistan-sponsored insurgency and terrorism have grown, human rights have taken a beating in Kashmir. A large role for the army in Kashmir has been a necessity in view of Pakistani military threat and subversion; but this has also meant a high cost in terms of the functioning of a civil libertarian polity.

Kashmir has also suffered from near-perpetual instability which has often led to, and has often

been caused by, repeated central intervention and political manipulation, dismissal of governments and replacement of one set of incompetent and corrupt ministers by another similar set, and imposition of President's Rule. As a result the people of the state have tended to regard centrally-supported rulers as puppets and governors as mere agents of the central government. It is, however, widely acknowledged that the 1996 and 2002 elections in the state were more or less fair and widely representative of the people of the state.

Jammu and Kashmir's accession to India is irreversible, though India is not likely to regain control over Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. It is clear that while it is necessary to take stern action against terrorism and insurgency, such action should not adversely affect the civil liberties and human rights of the people. The estranged Indo-Pak relations will continue to cast a deep and dark shadow over Jammu and Kashmir; but that makes it even more necessary that Kashmir is given a clean, sound and democratic government, free of excesses by the police and paramilitary forces.

The extent of local autonomy is a contentious issue that will have to be resolved keeping in view the sentiments of the people of the state and the federal constitutional structure of India. We believe, however, that more significant is the issue of how the democratic process in the state develops with the fuller participation of the people. It would not be difficult to resolve the Kashmir problem if two important parameters are kept in view. No democracy would easily permit secession of any of its parts, and no democracy can afford to ignore for long the wishes of any part of its people.