

India Is Weaponizing its Spiritual Tourists

Pilgrims headed to the divided region of Kashmir get armed guards and national encouragement — if they're Hindu

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Every July, thousands of buses, trucks, cars, mules, and palanquin bearers crawl up 12, 768 treacherous feet of mountainous terrain to reach the Amarnath cave, where a smooth ice stalagmite dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva reaches up from the cave floor. The devotees heading for this linga (a Hindu term for venerated, somewhat phallic objects) are making one of the most dangerous pilgrimages in India — not just because of the height and harsh weather, but because the cave is slap-bang in the middle of the divided, and violent, border state of Jammu and Kashmir.

But the Indian state has been encouraging, protecting, and controlling the flow of funds to these dangerous journeys. Kashmir has its fair share of traditional yatra (pilgrimage) sites. But India's current Hindu nationalist government is now backing efforts to turn it into an Indian Jerusalem, mixing religious and national sentiment to turn the disputed territory into sacred ground that can never be surrendered.

A busload of pilgrims on July 10 were the latest victims. Like most devotees, they traveled as part of an army-shielded convoy. The 200,000 yatris (pilgrims) who head to the cave every year are protected by 700,000 soldiers stationed in the province — 40,000 of them mobilized to protect this route alone. But a flat tire left them isolated and vulnerable. Four militants, allegedly from the Pakistan-based jihadi group Lashkar-e-Taiba, shot up the bus, killing seven people.

The attack on the Hindu pilgrims created a huge uproar in India, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeting that he was "pained beyond words [by] the dastardly attack on peaceful Amarnath Yatris." But the killings should have been no surprise. Indian intelligence organizations have gone on record saying they had information of an impending attack, and threats against pilgrims are made every year. This was the first successful attack since 2000, however, when 89 pilgrims were killed.

A dangerous pattern is emerging. New Delhi provides state patronage to religious pilgrimages in Kashmir, indirectly encouraging the Hindu claim over Kashmiri land. The organization of these pilgrimages sidelines the elected government of Jammu and Kashmir and emphasizes the jurisdiction of the national government over the state.

The roots of this lie in Kashmir's torn status. In colonial times, it was a princely state, with a Muslim-majority population. When the subcontinent was divided between India and Pakistan in 1947, Kashmir (now the state of Jammu and Kashmir) was ceded to India — but under certain conditions and with much of the populace clamoring to join Pakistan.

The U.N. recognizes Kashmir as disputed territory between India and Pakistan, and many Kashmiris seek independence or union with Pakistan. But Hindu nationalists, increasingly vocal and powerful throughout India, insist that it's an integral part of the country — and the fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) now controls both the national and the Jammu and Kashmir state government.

School textbooks already drill the notion of Kashmir as India's northernmost territory into children's heads, a viewpoint reinforced by angry TV pundits. The money being poured into pilgrimages reinforces this, mixing the national and the sacred to powerful effect. "Once you create sacred places in the valley, these lands cannot be easily alienated from mainland India," said Peer GN Suhail, the director of the Centre for Research and Development Policy (CRDP) in Srinagar.

"The use of religious tourism, a seemingly secular activity, as a tool to control conflict areas is not unknown, and one of the best documented is the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In the case of the Amarnath Yatra, the cave itself is not contested. What is similar between the two situations is the use of religious tourism to stake claim to a region," said Swathi Seshadri, a researcher for the Bangalore-based advocacy organization Equations.

There are plenty of harsh mountain pilgrimages in the rest of India, such as Badrinath or Kedarnath. But they lack the nationalistic tinge that comes with the Amarnath pilgrimage, where devotees chant "Bharat me rehna hai, bam bam bhole kehna hai" — "If you want to live in India, you have to chant Shiva's name" — a direct challenge to India's huge Muslim minority.

Incidents of Hindu and Muslim extremism have fed on each other in the province; brutal declarations by each side stir the other. In 1995, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, a Kashmiri militant outfit, announced that locals were forbidden from helping with the pilgrimage and threatened those who did. In turn, the Bajrang Dal, the militant arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, itself the ideological parent of the ruling BJP, called for all Indians to head to Amarnath, mobilizing more than 50,000 pilgrims.

"Extremist Hindu thought seems to beget right-wing Islam," said Muneeb Mir, a former state bureaucrat. "Poor devotees get caught in the middle."

In 1999, after the Kargil War, the fourth war between India and Pakistan, India's government-run Press Information Bureau put out a feature titled "Amarnath Yatra -99 Acid Test of Devotion." The feature begins by linking the Amarnath pilgrimage to unquestioning patriotism. "The eternal pilgrimage centre of Amarnath has been threatened from across the Line of Control [dividing Indian and Pakistani Kashmir] this year. Hence, it is a special occasion for the devotees to show their abiding faith in Lord Shiva, the Supreme Creator, by paying a visit to the Holy Cave in the higher reaches of Kashmir," it reads.

The Bajrang Dal organizes its own pilgrimage in central Kashmir that similarly talks about national integrity in unequivocal terms. Many travel companies offer a combination deal to travel to both places at reduced prices. "We should not limit our beliefs to worshiping our gods and religions but, we should also be faithful towards our National Integrity [sic] by coming forward to visit and worship such places and organize or be a part of such yatras," declares the pilgrimage's official website.

The Bajrang Dal is defensive of the ties between religious worship and nationalism. "What is wrong if Hindu pilgrims visit a place considered holy by us?" asked Rakesh Sharma, the president of Bajrang Dal's branch in Kashmir. "India has more than 80 percent Hindu population. We should be given a claim on our holy lands."

A board headed by the governor of Jammu and Kashmir now provides free transport, meals, and accommodation for Hindu pilgrims from all around the country, which has resulted in a drastic increase in their numbers. Just 4,000 people participated in the Amarnath pilgrimage in 1963, according to government data analyzed by Equations and the nonprofit Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS). The numbers remain the same with minor variations until about 1985, after which they see a sharp increase — along with the rise of Hindu nationalism and the BJP.

While 300,000 people visited the cave in 2015, about 200,000 people were registered to visit the cave last year. But the pilgrimage that started on July 2, 2016, was abruptly stopped six days later when militant leader Burhan Wani was killed by security forces and the valley saw widespread violent protests.

Trips to Kailash Kund, Machail Mata, and Kausar Nag — three other Hindu worship sites — also took off in the last decade. While they are traditionally important Hindu places of worship, it is only in the recent past that the number of visitors to these places has increased. Only 20,000 people visited Kailsh Kund in 2007, but by 2015 there were 170,000 visitors.

"Did these pilgrimages have a history? If not, why are they being promoted now? If they did, why didn't anyone hear about them until now?" asked Khurram Parvez, the founder of JKCCS. "The issue is claims over land."

Kashmir's Muslims can only watch from the sidelines. Most of the logistical support on the ground for the Amarnath pilgrimage is provided by local Muslim residents. Many protested the attack on the pilgrims last month. In fact, when the pilgrim bus was attacked, the driver — a local Muslim — sped away under fire, saving the lives of the rest of his passengers.

"We have no problems if pilgrims visit the temples here," said Muhammad Iqbal, 60, who is a resident of Panditgam village. "But the problem is when the pilgrims get more importance than the local residents. Doesn't that mean their claim over their religious lands is more than our claim over the lands we live on and grow food on?" Iqbal cited the restrictions imposed last August after the killing of Burhan Wani and subsequent protests. The internet was suspended, curfews were put in place, and even peaceful protests were banned.

But the Indian government remains determined to reinforce the tourist crusade. “The Amarnath pilgrimage is where the state comes together with religion in the most insidious way,” said Suhail, the CRDP director, noting how easy and threatening it was for New Delhi to stake its claim in the area through the power of faith. The danger isn’t just in disturbing the region’s already fragile order. It’s that, in the long term, turning Kashmir into a sacred spot will threaten to permanently disrupt any possible peace settlement. Kashmiris deserve the right to forge their own future — not to be a backdrop to a divided Indian Jerusalem.