

Liberal Political Initiatives - Past and Present, Third Time Lucky ?

The decks are now clear for the emergence of an organised effort to restore the Liberal dialogue in India. By S.V.Raju

Introduction

When some of us felt the need to revive the Indian Liberal

shared the concept that society existed for the benefit of the individual and not the individual for society. The late Dr. S. P. Aiyar, an outstanding political science teacher, described Liberalism as "a philosophy not an ideology; it provides the broadest framework for the progress of individuals and societies"².

Reason for Revival

Why did some of us feel the need to revive the Indian Liberal Group? The most important reason was the steep decline since independence in human values, public character, morality and a gradual disintegration of democratic institutions in the country. Corruption on an unprecedented scale was eating into the vitals of India's society and democratic polity. While there are a number of voluntary organizations dedicated to specific areas such as gender justice, civil rights etc., an

organization at the grass roots level with an over-all Liberal perspective which could say and do what needed to be said and done without being inhibited by considerations of power or the fear of losing votes was absent.

Power Crazy Politicians

At the time of independence India had a leadership of high quality in terms of idealism, commitment and fired by Gandhian ideals. In the fifty years following freedom these qualities of leadership have all but disappeared. After independence politics got closely linked to power which became an end in itself and no longer a means to serve the people.

The primary purpose of politicians and political parties was the retention of power by any means. As Achyut Patwardhan an eminent participant in India's struggle put it: "Today the State has lost all moral authority. It is viewed

Group¹, we faced a minor dilemma? The word meant many things to many people - from those who assigned the State the role of a night watchman and advocated a *laissez faire* economy, to those who were less suspicious of the State and were prepared to give it powers to participate in economic activities in areas where private initiative and entrepreneurship were lacking.

We resolved this dilemma by accepting the fact that it would be enough if we were to get together persons who believed in the primacy of the individual vis-a-vis the state and

1. The Indian Liberal Group was founded by Minoo Masani in the Nineteen Sixties and was perhaps the only organised non-party, but very political, forum to promote Liberalism and Liberal values ('L' in upper case) in the country. The Group had been lying dormant for the last few years.

2. S.P.Aiyar: 'The Concept of Liberalism and its Relevance for India' essay contributed to Freedom and Dissent - Essays in Honour of Minoo Masani, A DRS Publication. [Liberalism ~~was a revolt against the restrictions and privileges of feudalism.~~ It placed the individual at the centre of its philosophy and emphasised his ability to reason out social arrangements and sort things out for himself. It stressed his right to trade and to enter into contracts, his freedom to bargain and the freedom of enterprise. It was, therefore, the function of government to guarantee the peaceful employment of property and provide the external conditions of law and order... Liberalism asserted the right of free men to express opinions and assert their civil and political rights. The heart of the matter was the liberation of individuals and society from irrational restraints.]

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as the creation of crooks, by crooks, for crooks. Nothing seems to work without the use of money, muscle power or influence. So even if we have achieved a little prosperity, people think it is 'inspite' and not 'because' of the State.

Liberals like Dadabhai Naoroji, Mahadeo Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Dinshaw Wacha, Pherozeshah Mehta, Karsondas Mulji, Kandakuri Veeresalingam Pantulu and V.S.Srinivasa Sastri who founded 'The National Liberal Foundation' in 1918, were trenchant critics of British rule. But their priorities were not immediate independence.

Back in 1947, you could distinguish between bandits and politicians, not now. That is a measure of how far we have fallen.³

Beginnings of Indian Liberalism

The history of Indian liberalism begins in the eighteenth century with Ram Mohan Roy "with his concerns for social reform and the uplift of women, for education as a means of social transformation, for the freedom of the press".⁴

It was the liberals who spearheaded the freedom movement in the 19th century. The Indian National Congress was a creation of the Liberals and pursued Liberal policies. Liberals like Dadabhai Naoroji, Mahadeo Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Dinshaw Wacha, Pherozeshah Mehta, Karsondas Mulji, Kandakuri Veeresalingam Pantulu and V.S.Srinivasa Sastri who founded 'The National Liberal Foundation' in 1918, were trenchant critics of British rule. But their priorities were not immediate independence.

Undoubtedly they wanted freedom from British rule but this had to be preceded by social reform, a campaign to remove the scourge of casteism, freedom from illiteracy, from superstition and blind faith. They saw nothing wrong in taking what was good in British rule including the English language. They did not subscribe to the belief that by learning English you were neglecting your mother tongue. Many

of those mentioned above were not only masters of English prose but were outstanding writers in their mother tongue. They wanted that criticism be fair and opposition be based on reason and not on emotions.

Role of the State

They adapted western concepts to suit Indian conditions. India's Liberals of the nineteenth and early twentieth century did not subscribe to the concept of a negative role for the State. For instance Ranade had this to say on the subject: "Speaking roughly, the province of state interference and control is practically being extended so as to restore the good points of the mercantile system without its absurdities. The State is now more and more recognised as a national organ taking care of national needs in all matters in which individual and cooperative efforts are not likely to be so effective and economic as national effort. This is a correct view to take for the true functions of a state. To relegate them to the simple duty of maintaining peace and order is really to deprive the community of many of its advantages of the Social Union".⁵

Post Independent State

The Liberal domination of the Indian National Congress ended when Gandhiji took over the leadership of the freedom movement and resorted to methods of agitation. Gandhi was a Liberal. His views and

3. Quoted by Professor Sadanand Varde, himself a participant in India's freedom struggle and a close associate of Achyut Patwardhan. Cited in *Freedom First*, July-September, 1997.

4. S.P.Aiyar: 'The Concept of Liberalism and its Relevance for India' essay contributed to *Freedom and Dissent - Essays in Honour of Minoo Masani*, A DRS Publication.

5. Cited by S.P.Aiyar in his paper: 'The Concept of Liberalism and its Relevance for India' essay contributed to *Freedom and Dissent - Essays in Honour of Minoo Masani*, A DRS Publication.

those of Gokhale (whom Gandhiji considered his political guru) were similar. But Gandhiji demanded freedom here and now and was not prepared to wait while the people were educated and ready to take over the administration of a free India. Undoubtedly Gandhiji galvanized the people and hastened freedom. However when one looks around India today can one not legitimately wonder if the Liberals of the last century were not justified in their cautious approach? The Liberals faded away and the Indian National Congress, after independence and under Pandit Nehru's leadership, went on to adopt the 'socialistic pattern of society' as its credo. The

policies pursued increased the powers of the state enormously.

Re-emergence of Liberalism

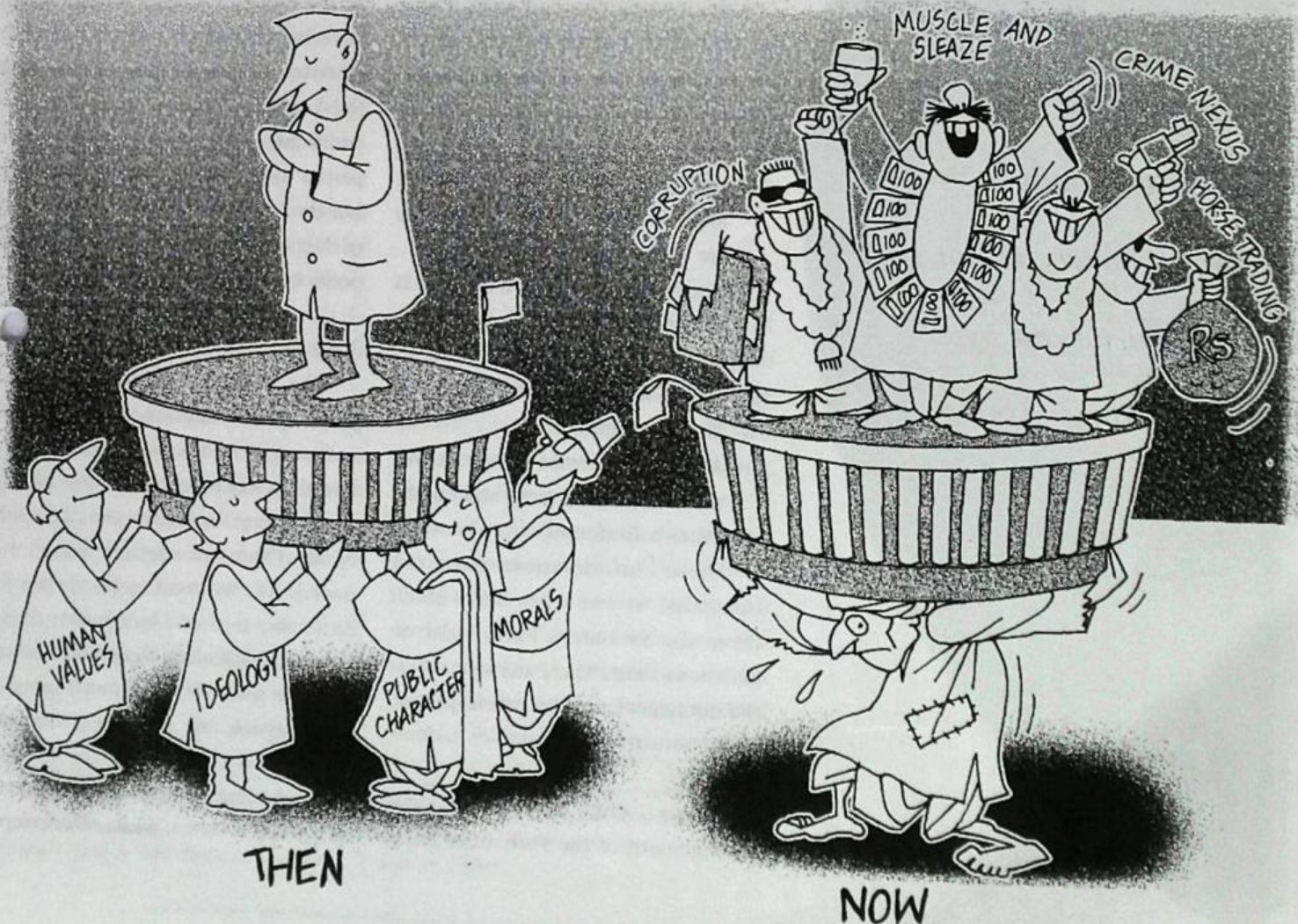
It would be almost four decades before the Liberal movement made a comeback in the form of the Swatantra Party. Founded in June 1959, the immediate provocation was the very real threat of collectivisation of farms in the guise of cooperative farming. A call by Minoo Masani and C. Rajagopalachari to support the new Party evoked a ready response from the All India Agriculturists Federation and from a section of trade and industry who bore the brunt of the statist system of permits, licences and quotas.

Until the advent of the Swatantra Party on the political scene, it was considered politically foolhardy for anyone or any group to challenge the concept of socialism. It was tantamount to challenging the charismatic leadership of Pandit Nehru. [It required courage particularly on the part of some businessmen, industrialists and traders to openly identify themselves with the Swatantra Party and even more, to fund it.]

Rise of the Swatantra Party

The party's rise was meteoric - from 12 members elected to the Lok Sabha in 1962 to 44 in 1967. The Party headed a principled coalition government in

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Orissa; recognition as the official opposition in the state assemblies of Gujarat and Rajasthan and a significant presence in the state assemblies of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. The party pioneered policies that were

intended to set traditions and standards of parliamentary and political behaviour. It must be remembered that the Constitution of India is itself a liberal document and the Swatantra Party sought to build a polity around this document.

This writer who was intimately associated with this Party from almost its inception to its virtual extinction over a period of fourteen years and was present at all meetings of its National Executive, was a personal witness to the following considerations that were stressed at most of the meetings of this body:

Guiding Principles

1. When taking decisions, imagine that you are in power and take the decision concerned only if you consider it to be in the people's and the country's interest.
2. Adhere to the Gandhian dictum of ends and means. Under no circumstances resort to means that are questionable even if the ends are worthwhile.
3. Understand that what is popular is not necessarily right and therefore do not be guided by considerations of popularity but treat each issue on merit.
4. Always remember that power should chase the party and not the other way around.

These considerations were not calculated to win votes but without these the Swatantra Party had no reason to exist. The Party's founders did not believe in short cuts to power.

The Fall

Those who took over the management of the Party after Rajaji

and Masani ignored these basic ideals and the party all but disappeared. The little part that remained is now not able to participate in the electoral process because of a stipulation inserted in the Representation of the People Act by the Rajiv Gandhi Government that to qualify for registration with the Election Commission of India every political party should swear allegiance, among others things, to socialism. A writ petition filed by this writer and one other in December 1994 in the Bombay High Court, challenging this provision has still to come up for hearing.

The second Liberal initiative thus petered out in the early seventies. This happened not because the Liberal idea was rejected by the people or because of the electoral defeat it suffered in 1971 but because its then leadership failed to adequately appreciate the fact the route to power was through political arrangements with other parties without any identifiable policies but through a campaign of education of the people on the virtues of a liberal polity based on certain basic values.

Tolerant India, Not Liberal

The assertion that the liberal philosophy is natural to India and that Indian society has been essentially a liberal society is not quite borne out by our history. Tolerant yes. Liberal, hardly. Often our tolerance was at the peer level. We tend to be servile to those above us and lord it over those below us particularly those lower down the caste hierarchy. The much praised panchayats, as evidence of our republican temper, were, as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar pointed out, dominated by the upper castes. While recent steps

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to restore Panchayat Raj institutions have tried to set right this imbalance we need to accept the fact that liberalism does not come to us naturally. It is necessary for this to be said to underline the handicaps which Liberalism has to contend with.

Liberals A Permanent Opposition?

Does this mean that a political party that professes a Liberal philosophy can never hope to succeed in India. It depends on what we mean by succeed. Years ago I recall a comment by Mr.N.Dandeker who was then a member of the Lok Sabha and General Secretary of the Swatantra Party. He said, given the values for which the Party stood, there was little likelihood of the Party ever achieving power. He said: "I suppose we are condemned to be a permanent opposition." After a brief pause he added, "perhaps 'condemned' is not the right word. What's wrong with being in the opposition. We perform a useful role." Many years earlier during British rule, Gopal Krishna Gokhale expressed a similar view while speaking in the Indian Legislative Assembly.

The contours of party politics have changed much since then. We are now in the era of coalition politics. And in such a situation a Liberal political party can make its presence felt, perhaps even an opportunity to share power. At the same time, such a party must take care that it does not degenerate into a mere power seeking machine, no different from the many parties

proliferating the country, if it wishes to retain its identity and be the spokesman for policies based on the philosophy of Liberalism.

Liberal View of Governance

The *raison d'être* of a Liberal party is to provide a strong government without meddling in affairs that are not the state's concern. The economic reforms initiated by the Congress in the late eighties are almost similar to the kind of economic system advocated by the Swatantra Party 40 years earlier in 1959. The word 'almost' is used advisedly because economic reforms if they are to be honestly implemented require conviction.

But at the moment, with the remnant of the Swatantra Party tied up in court, do Liberals fold their hands and watch the country slide into chaos and to levels where even the floors of legislatures at the centre and the states are not spared riotous behaviour? Where the concept of market economy is perverted and liberalisation acquires a bad odour?

Indian Liberal Group

Since power is not the sole aim of those who profess liberal values, we decided that we would revive the Indian Liberal Group which would champion Liberal values seeking support wherever it could be found. A series of workshops held over the last twenty months revealed that indeed there were many who were fed up with the state of affairs and were prepared to get together. A National Symposium held in Delhi last November, provided further evidence of this desire on the

part of those who cherished liberal values to do something about it. A statement on Liberal Priorities for India in the Twenty First Century was adopted and recommended to the Indian Liberal Group for its consideration. Here are some highlights.⁶

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6. Liberal Priorities for India in the 21st Century - From the text of a Statement which found general acceptance at the National Symposium on Liberal Priorities for India in the 21st Century, held in New Delhi on November 23 and 24, 1999)

The Liberalisation of the Indian Economy and Social Justice

Liberalism believes that the business of government is governance not business. In the context of

globalisation, a social market economy will seek to ensure that needless impediments to the conduct of industry, business and trade are removed.

In a free economy 'the consumer is sovereign'. It is the consumers' purchasing power reflected by the demand for specific goods and services that decides what to produce and how much to produce. The motive force of a free economy, in the liberal view, is growth. At the same time a free market system is alive to its social obligations. A government, in a social market economy will focus its attention on the social sector which has been sadly neglected. These include the provision of clean drinking water, primary health care, primary education, basic infrastructure like roads and the like..

There is need to encourage entrepreneurship and self-employment particularly in the light of fast developing technology. This would spur an upward movement of people and each entrepreneur can provide work for one or more persons. Jobs and self employment opportunities have to be encouraged in sectors like agriculture, plantations, and in a variety of infrastructure activities.

Without administrative and political decentralisation the goals of social justice may not be accomplished. Letting people decide what their development needs are will not only generate social and political awareness among them but also instill a sense of

self-respect and build strong leadership at the local and community levels.

Freedom of Speech and Expression and The Right to Information

Freedom of Expression, one of the cardinal principles of liberalism is recognised universally as a Human Right – the basic right of every human being, irrespective of colour, race, gender or status. The Indian Constitution – largely liberal in spirit – recognised this inasmuch as "liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship" figure in its admirable preamble.

However in the last fifty years, this freedom which should have expanded, has through several amendments contracted reducing spaces where freedom can be exercised.

The destruction of works of art or the banning or burning of books is a clear sign of growing intolerance. In a liberal democratic state, even while such acts should be curbed with an iron hand, there is need to educate people on forms of protest that are consistent with a liberal society.

In a liberal state, citizens can exercise their rights meaningfully only if they are adequately informed. At the same time there is need to develop appropriate measures to protect the privacy of the individual particularly in the context of the intrusive capabilities of modern communications technology.

Liberals should support any legislation that seeks to empower citizens with the Right to Information, particularly in areas where large financial outlays are involved. In a

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liberal society, acts of governments should be both transparent and accountable.

Technology and Human Development

Technology is critical for human development. It is among the major factors that contribute to economic growth and competitiveness.

The gap between developed and developing countries is growing, especially in the field of science and technology. Unfortunately the experience so far tells us that the political will to harness technology for human development is lacking.

There is evidence, however, that things are changing and there is some awareness of the role science and technology can play in enabling India catch up with the developed world and help our people achieve a better quality of life. This trend needs to be encouraged. This involves:

- Encouraging private companies to invest in R&D.
- Restricting the role of the State to pure science research and defence.
- Restricting the government's regulatory sphere to the setting up of standards for telecom and other commercial technological spheres.
- At the same time the State has a role to play in helping provide the infrastructure in the areas of primary education and primary health. It needs to create an environment where private investment in science and technology is encouraged. And, most importantly, freeing the environment from political and bureaucratic interference.

Active Citizenship

In a democracy, sovereignty vests in the citizen. The ultimate purpose of society and the state is to assure the dignity of the individual.

Before election to any public office, citizens should prepare their own manifesto which would *inter alia* affirm that they would vote for only those candidates who have no criminal record, who are dedicated to serve the public and who would visit their constituencies regularly.

By strengthening local self-governing institutions, citizens can bring about a devolution of power at the grass roots level of society.

Conclusion

The decks are now clear for the emergence of a third organised effort to restore the Liberal dialogue in the country. The Indian Liberal Group or the ILG would, by the time this issue appears, have drawn up its Constitution and a statement of Basic Principles.

Perhaps the Liberals will be third time lucky!

One last word before I sign off. One problem we encountered in our workshops and even in the reports of our workshops and the symposium that were carried in the press.. Liberalisation and Liberalism, are used as if they are synonymous. There is confusion that Liberalisation and Liberalism are one and the same. Liberalisation generally connotes a freer economy; Liberalism goes far beyond economics. Communist China has Liberalisation but a one party dictatorship. This is not acceptable. To the committed Liberal,

Liberalism connotes a free economy in a free society. On this there can be no compromise. ■

Mr S.V. Raju is President of the Indian Liberal Group

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Urge for Identity and Democracy in J&K State

The people of Jammu and Kashmir state, above all, desire and deserve to be understood instead of mere sympathy and attention they do get from far and wide. The barrage of partisan propaganda over respective claims and counter claims regarding the final status of the state clouds complexities of its reality. **By Balraj Puri**

Introduction

An adequate knowledge of the demographic composition of the state; its geographical and strategic position; the wide range of its diversities, ethnic, religious, cultural, historical; aspirations and interests of each of its diverse communities; is necessary for understanding this unique state and its people.

Each of the three geographical regions of the state, Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh, has its distinct history and culture and ethnic background. Within each region too, there are varying degrees of diversities. Kashmir has, for a variety of reasons, played a pivotal role in the politics of the state. Not only because the rest of the world knows the state by this name and Kashmiri speaking leaders have represented it nationally and internationally, but they have also led all the governments in the state since independence.

Pre-Islamic Culture

It is the only part of the subcontinent which has an uninterrupted record of 5000 years of history. Originally inhabited by pre-Aryan and non-Aryan races called Nagas and Pishachs, it accepted Vedic, Buddhist, Shaivite and Islamic faiths without giving up its earlier cultural acquisitions. It still retains not only some of the pre-Islamic beliefs, rituals and

practices but also a sense of pride in its pre-Islamic achievements in the fields of, say, philosophy, culture and politics.

For, unlike in the rest of the subcontinent, periodisation of history in Kashmir, according to scholars and the popular perception, is not based on religion. The watershed in its history is 1586 AD when Akbar annexed it to the Mughal empire.

The year divides its history into Kashmiri and non-Kashmiri rule. The latter included only 200 years of rule by the Muslim kings. The rest of the earlier period of over 4000 years rule by the non-Muslim Kings is equally owned by Kashmiris as their own. The non-Kashmiri rule of 364 years which includes a rule by Muslim Kings like Mughals and Afghans for about 250 years is disowned by them as much as they disown the rule by the non-Kashmiri Hindu Kings. Further, Kashmiri language does not belong to the Indo-Aryan family of languages spoken from Dhaka (in Bangladesh) to Peshawar (in Pakistan).

Kashmiri Identity

Kashmir Valley of around 1900 Square miles is enclosed by 10,000 to 18,000 feet high mountains. Thus geographical compactness and isolation renowned for its proverbial beauty, cultural homogeneity, historical continuity and recent political developments have created a deep sense of

Kashmiri identity. With 95% of them professing Islam, Kashmiri identity and Muslim identity are almost synonymous. For Kashmiri identity is Islamised and Islam has been Kashmirised.

But the Kashmiri speaking community of the Valley does not constitute the majority in the state. Before independence Jammu was the most populous region of the state. The Line of Control that kept the Kashmiri speaking region in tact divides Jammu region. According to the last Census, held in 1981, Kashmir region has a population of 52 per cent, out of which ten percent on the periphery of the Valley, are non-Kashmiri communities. Out of the 42 percent Kashmiris, 5 percent are Hindus, all of them belong to the Brahman caste and are called Kashmiri Pandits. Their importance exceeds their number as it is a talented community which had the unique distinction of being cent percent literate even before independence.

The Jammu Region

Jammu region is unlike the Kashmir Valley in many respects. The Kashmiris were debarred from army service before independence and were declared a non-martial community. The state army was exclusively manned by Jammu's soldiers who also contributed the maximum share, in proportion to its population, to the British Indian army during the second world war. Dogra Kings of Jammu founded the present