

## DEVELOPING RELIGIOUS TOURISM

Jammu & Kashmir has long been revered as a sacred land where faith, culture, and spirituality converge. From the holy cave shrine of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi and the Amarnath Cave to the revered Hazratbal Shrine, Shankaracharya Temple, Gurudwara Chhatti Padshahi, and ancient monasteries of Ladakh, the region represents a rare spiritual mosaic. Developing religious tourism in J&K is not merely about increasing footfall; it is about harnessing this spiritual legacy to drive inclusive development, social harmony, and sustainable livelihoods.

Religious tourism already forms the backbone of J&K's tourism economy, particularly in the Jammu region. The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi shrine alone attracts millions of pilgrims annually, generating employment and sustaining local businesses. Similarly, the annual Amarnath Yatra has significant economic and cultural impact. With improved infrastructure, better management, and diversified pilgrimage circuits, religious tourism can become a year-round economic driver rather than a seasonal activity.

The government's recent focus on infrastructure development-better roads, rail connectivity, modern accommodation, and digital services-has created a strong foundation. The extension of rail links, upgraded highways, and improved air connectivity have made remote religious sites more accessible. However, physical infrastructure must be complemented by soft infrastructure such as trained guides, multilingual signage, clean sanitation facilities, medical support, and efficient crowd management systems to enhance pilgrim experience.

Importantly, religious tourism in J&K must be developed with sensitivity and balance. The region's spiritual sites are deeply intertwined with its fragile ecology and diverse social fabric. Unregulated construction, unmanaged crowds, or commercial exploitation can damage both heritage and environment. Sustainable tourism practices-eco-friendly facilities, waste management, and controlled pilgrim flows-are essential to preserve sanctity while promoting growth.

Local community participation is another key factor. When local youth are trained as guides, hospitality workers, artisans, and service providers, tourism becomes a source of dignity and empowerment rather than external dependency. Encouraging local handicrafts, cuisine, and cultural performances around pilgrimage centres can ensure that economic benefits reach grassroots levels.

## Selective Minorities killings in Bangladesh and India's strategic response

■ PURAN CHAND SHARMA

At this critical point of time, incidents involving violence against minorities and other vulnerable communities in Bangladesh have drawn sharp attention across South Asia and globally as well. These include mob lynching, killings linked to allegations of blasphemy, and reports of broader hostility targeting minorities. India's Ministry of External affairs has publicly condemned these developments, calling 'unremitting hostilities. Bangladesh, born out of the 1971 Liberation war with India's decisive support, was founded on the ideals of secularism, linguistic identity and cultural pluralism. However, in recent decades, selective attacks on religious and ethnic minorities particularly Hindus, Buddhists and Christians have raised serious humanitarian and regional security concerns. These incidents are not isolated law and order problems but systems of deeper ideological, political, and socio-economic challenges. In view of India's civilizational ties, moral responsibility and strategic interests. New Delhi must adopt clever diplomacy and a proactive, humane approach to safeguard people and uphold regional stability.

Genesis of the Prevailing critical Situation in Bangladesh

1. Ideological Shift from Secularism to Religious Polarization:-Bangladesh's original Constitution upheld Secularism but political accommodation of religious extremism over time weakened this foundation. Radical groups exploited religious sentiments, gradually normalizing intolerance against minorities who are perceived as politically weak and culturally distinct.

2. Rise of Islamic Extremism and Radical Networks:- Global Jihadist ideologies, cross-border radical influence and local extremist outfits have created an environment where minority communities become "Soft Targets". Attacks during religious festivals, temple vandalism and targeted killings are often used to instill fear and force migration.

3. Political Opportunism and Vote- Politics:

Minorities are frequently targeted during Election periods. Political silence or delayed actions by authorities emboldens perpetrators, creating a culture of impunity. In many cases, violence is used to alter local demography or seize minority owned property.

4. Weak Law Enforcement and impunity:- Delayed justice, Lack of convictions and political Shielding of perpetrators embolden attackers and deepen minority insecurity.

5. Regional and Global influences:- Cross border radical ideologies, foreign funding of extremist networks and online radicalization worsen the problem, making it transnational in character.

India's Strategic Response, What Can And Should Be Done

1. Firm but Quiet Diplomacy: India should raise minority protection consistently in bilateral dialogues, avoiding public grandstanding but ensuring it remains non negotiable. Confidential diplomacy often yields better results than megaphone diplomacy.

2. Linking Cooperation with accountability: Economic aid, infrastructure projects , defense cooperation and transit facilities should be informally linked to Bangladesh's performance on minority safety, rule of law and human rights protection.

3. Internationalization Through Multilateral Forums: Without directly naming and shaming , India can take recourse to the following significant measures:- Use platforms like UN Human Rights bodies, BIM-STECC (Bay of Bengal initiative for multi sectoral Technical and economic cooperation) and commonwealth forums. Support global norms on minority protection, making Bangladesh more accountable internationally. Intelligence and Counter-Extremism cooperation: India and Bangladesh should deepen intelligence sharing to dismantle extremist networks. A strong Bangladesh state is in India's interest.

Protection of Cultural and Religious Heritage: India can offer technical and financial assistance for the protection of temples, monasteries and minority neighborhoods,

framing it as cultural preservation, not interference.

Practical And Humane Solutions To The Crisis

A. Empowering Bangladeshi Institutions:- Police Reforms Fast Track courts for communal crimes Independent minority commissions. India can provide training, technology, and best practices.

B. Economic Upliftment of Minorities: Poverty fuels vulnerability. Joint development projects in minority- dominated districts reduce radical influence and migration pressure.

C. Civil Society and Track-2 Diplomacy: People to people engagement, academic exchanges, religious dialogue and media collaboration can counter extremist narratives more effectively than state action alone.

D. Refugee Management with humanity and security. India must balance compassion with caution:-

Temporary humanitarian assistance must be made available on merits Clear distinction between refugees and infiltrators shall be meticulously complied with for better results. Regional burden sharing mechanisms must promptly evolve and flourish for soothing results.

In this whole process, few Challenges and Ethical Dilemmas do crop up, such as: Non-interference vs. Moral Responsibility, Diplomatic silence vs. domestic public pressure, Human rights advocacy vs Regional stability. India must avoid both apathy and excessive adventurism. The solution lies in strategic patience backed by firm resolve.

Having said this all it is keenly observed and noticed that the issue of selective killings and persecution of religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh has emerged as a deeply painful and extremely troubling humanitarian and strategic concern in South Asia. While Bangladesh was founded on ideals of Secularism and pluralism, periodic waves of violence -often targeting Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and indigenous communities - raise serious concerns about state

## When Birds Broke Silence of the Night

■ POOJA RANI

As a child growing up in a village, one statement was repeated so often by our elders that it felt like a natural law: "Birds do not chirp at night." And indeed, they didn't. Nights in the village had a character of their own-deep darkness, cool air, and a silence that felt complete. Once the sun went down, birds retreated into trees, surrendering the night to insects, frogs, and the occasional owl.

Years later, living in a city, I often wake up at midnight or in the early hours of the morning to a sharp, high-pitched bird call slicing through the stillness. It is loud, sudden, and strangely persistent. Each time I hear it, I remember my childhood nights and wonder-what has changed so much that birds have begun breaking the silence of the night?

Memory Versus Modern Reality

Our elders' observations were not superstition; they were rooted in lived experience. Villages once followed the natural rhythm of sunrise and sunset. There were no neon lights, no traffic humming through the night, and no constant human activity. Darkness was complete, and silence was respected.

Cities, on the other hand, never truly sleep. Artificial lights glow endlessly, temperatures remain high even after sunset, and human movement continues around the clock. In such conditions, it is not just humans whose habits have changed-nature itself is adapting.

Understanding Bird Behavior

Most birds are diurnal, meaning they are active during daylight and

rest at night. Their internal biological clock, known as the circadian rhythm, is guided primarily by natural light. When the sun sets, hormonal changes signal birds to rest.

However, scientists and ornithologists have observed that some birds, especially those living close to human settlements, are gradually altering this rhythm. Among them, the Asian Koel has become one of the most noticeable examples in Indian cities.

The Mystery Bird of Midnight

The sharp, high-pitched sound that many urban residents hear at night often comes from the female Asian Koel. Unlike the melodious "koo-ooo" of the male koel, the female produces a piercing, repetitive call that can sound almost alarming in the quiet of the night. This call is most common during the breeding season, but in cities it can be heard even beyond that period. Researchers suggest that the female koel's call is linked to mating behavior and territorial signals-activities that are now extending into nighttime hours due to altered environmental cues.

Role of Artificial Lighting

One of the biggest disruptors of natural bird behavior is artificial light at night (ALAN). Streetlights, building lights, and illuminated hoardings confuse birds into mistaking night for an extension of daytime.

Studies in urban ecology reveal that constant exposure to artificial light:

- Delays melatonin production in birds
- Alters sleep patterns
- Encourages vocal activity at

unusual hours

In simpler terms, birds are no longer sure when night truly begins.

Urban Heat and Climate Change

Cities create what scientists call the urban heat island effect, where temperatures remain higher than surrounding rural areas. Warmer nights affect insect populations, food availability, and breeding cycles. Birds respond by adjusting their activity patterns, sometimes becoming active at night when conditions feel favorable.

Climate change further intensifies this disruption. Shifting seasons and unpredictable weather patterns have blurred the once-clear boundaries between natural cycles.

From Villages to Cities: A Forced Migration

Ironically, while cities expand, many villages are losing green cover. Trees are cut for roads, construction, and development, pushing birds to seek safer habitats. Cities-with their parks, gardens, and fruit-bearing trees-become unexpected refuges.

Birds like the koel are highly adaptable. They have learned to survive amidst concrete, noise, and light. But this adaptability comes at a cost: natural behavior is replaced by survival behavior.

Elders, Ecology, and Truth

When elders said birds do not chirp at night, they spoke a truth shaped by a balanced ecosystem. Today's reality does not prove them wrong; it reveals how deeply human actions have disturbed that balance.

The bird calling at midnight is not an anomaly-it is a signal. A signal that nature is adjusting itself to our lifestyle rather than the other way around.

A Personal Reflection

Initially, that sharp call irritated me. It felt intrusive, unnecessary, even disturbing. But over time, my irritation turned into reflection. The bird is not being unreasonable. It is responding to the world we have created.

Perhaps the question is not why birds chirp at night now, but why nights are no longer meant for rest at all.

Why This Matters

Such changes may seem minor, but they point toward larger environmental consequences:

- Disrupted ecosystems
  - Altered breeding success
  - Increased stress on wildlife
- When birds lose their natural rhythm, it indicates an environment under strain.

What Can Be Done

While urban life cannot return to complete darkness, small conscious steps can help:

- Reducing unnecessary night lighting
- Preserving urban green spaces
- Planting native trees
- Creating awareness about ecological balance

These actions not only help birds but also restore a sense of calm to human life.

Listening to the Night Again

That sharp midnight call is no longer just a sound to me. It is a reminder of childhood nights, of elders' wisdom, and of nature's resilience. The night is still speaking, but in a changed voice.

If we listen carefully, it may guide us back toward harmony-where birds rest at night, and silence once again feels complete.

## The Taste of Integration: Culinary Journeys on Kashmir Vande Bharat Express

The extension of the Vande Bharat Express into Jammu and Kashmir marks not only a significant achievement for Indian Railways but also a meaningful step toward cultural integration. Connecting Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra with Srinagar, the semi-high-speed train passes through the scenic Pir Panjal range and offers passengers more than just a comfortable journey-it delivers a unique culinary experience that reflects the cultural diversity of the region.

What sets the Kashmir Vande Bharat Express apart is its thoughtfully curated onboard menu, which changes according to the direction of travel. By aligning cuisine with geography, the train transforms a routine commute into a cultural narrative, offering travelers a taste of local traditions from both Jammu and Kashmir. This innovative approach highlights how infrastructure can serve as a bridge between distinct regional identities.

While traveling from Katra to Srinagar, passengers are served authentic Dogri cuisine, representing the Duggar culture of the Jammu region. Known for its simple yet hearty flavors, Dogri food emphasizes comfort and nourishment. Dishes such as Rajma, Haak Saag, Kashmiri Kadam, Haak Paneer, and other vegetarian preparations showcase the region's agrarian roots and culinary heritage.

On the return journey from Srinagar to Katra, the menu shifts to the celebrated flavors of Kashmiri cuisine. Influenced by Persian and Central Asian traditions,



Kashmiri food is known for its aromatic spices and refined taste. Passengers can enjoy delicacies such as Kashmiri Pulao, Zeera Aloo, Haak Paneer, Kashmiri Kadam, and Kesar Phirni. The use of ingredients like saffron, dried ginger, and fennel reflects the sophistication of Kashmiri culinary traditions, often associated with the famed multi-course Wazwan.

Beyond gastronomy, this culinary initiative carries a deeper message of national integration. By placing the distinct food cultures of Jammu and Kashmir on the same platform, the Vande Bharat Express promotes cultural exchange, supports local farmers and food traditions, and fosters emotional connections among travelers from different parts of the country.

The Kashmir Vande Bharat Express demonstrates that development is not solely about speed and modern technology but also about preserving and celebrating cultural identity. As passengers enjoy a warm cup of Kahwa against the backdrop of snow-clad mountains, they are not just journeying between two destinations-they are experiencing the living spirit of a unified and diverse India.

## Amar Mahal Palace: Timeless heritage and tourism icon of Jammu

■ VIKRAM SINGH JAMWAL

Standing with quiet grandeur on a hilltop overlooking the winding Tawi River, the Amar Mahal Palace is one of Jammu's most treasured heritage landmarks and a shining symbol of Dogra architectural and cultural legacy.

Built in the 19th century and completed around 1890, the palace was commissioned by Dogra ruler Raja Amar Singh and designed by a French architect in the elegant French Chateau style. Today, it has evolved into a vibrant museum and a major attraction on Jammu's cultural and heritage tourism map.

Amar Mahal Palace is a rare architectural marvel in the Indian subcontinent. Constructed entirely from red sandstone, the palace reflects European chateau design through its sloping roofs, tall arched windows, decorative tur-

rets, and symmetrical layout. These Western architectural elements, when combined with the dramatic Himalayan landscape and the serene Tawi River below, create a visual composition that is both regal and harmonious.

The palace's elevated position was thoughtfully chosen-not only for strategic and climatic advantages but also to offer commanding views of the surrounding valley. For visitors today, this translates into breathtaking panoramas, making Amar Mahal Palace a favorite destination for photographers, artists, and nature lovers.

Originally serving as a royal residence, Amar Mahal Palace was a center of refined courtly life during the Dogra era. Over time, it was transformed into a museum with the objective of preserving and showcasing the rich heritage of the Dogra dynasty. This transformation has ensured that the palace remains a living monument rather than a silent relic.

The museum's most iconic exhibit is the magnificent golden



throne of the Dogra kings, an extraordinary piece of craftsmanship and a powerful symbol of sovereignty. Equally impressive is the palace's vast library, which houses thousands of rare books, manuscripts, and historical documents, some dating back several centuries. This collection reflects the Dogra rulers' deep appreciation for knowledge, literature, philoso-

phy, and governance.

In addition, the museum displays an extensive collection of Dogra art, miniature paintings, period furniture, photographs, and royal memorabilia. These exhibits offer visitors an intimate glimpse into the cultural, administrative, and social life of Jammu during the princely era.

From a tourism perspective,

Amar Mahal Palace plays a vital role in introducing visitors to Jammu's royal past. Located close to the city center, it is easily accessible and often included in heritage walks and guided city tours. Informative guided tours enhance the visitor experience by narrating stories of the palace, the Dogra rulers, and the architectural nuances of the structure.

The palace complex also hosts cultural programs, art exhibitions, literary events, and educational activities, making it a dynamic cultural space rather than a static museum. These initiatives attract students, researchers, and cultural tourists, encouraging longer stays and deeper engagement with Jammu's heritage.

For tourists, Amar Mahal Palace offers much more than historical insight. Its peaceful surroundings provide a welcome escape from the bustle of city life, while its scenic viewpoints offer moments of quiet reflection. The palace's unique blend of European architecture and Indian royal heritage makes it an exceptional stop for travelers interested in architecture, history, and cross-cultural influences.

Visitors often combine a trip to Amar Mahal Palace with nearby attractions such as Bahu Fort, Mubarak Mandi Palace, and Raghnath Temple, making it an integral part of a broader cultural itinerary. As a result, the palace

contributes significantly to promoting Jammu as a destination rich in heritage, culture, and refined tourism experiences.

Today, Amar Mahal Palace stands as a proud testament to thoughtful preservation and cultural stewardship. It demonstrates how historic royal residences can be successfully repurposed into vibrant tourism assets without compromising their dignity or authenticity.

As Jammu continues to grow as a cultural and heritage tourism hub, Amar Mahal Palace remains one of its finest ambassadors-inviting visitors to explore history, admire architectural excellence, and experience the timeless elegance of the Dogra legacy. Majestic, serene, and enduring, the Amar Mahal Palace is not just a monument of the past, but a living experience that continues to enrich the cultural soul of Jammu.

(The author is former Senior Superintendent of Police J&K and presently Secretary Amar Mahal Museum)