

Redeeming Ourselves as People in Jammu and Kashmir

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The approach towards Kashmir is based on the assessment that this phase of the *azaadi* movement will tire itself out. Instead, it is more likely that it will eventually result in the re-emergence of armed militancy. It is never too late to do the right thing and once the Indian state removes restrictions on civil liberties, it can reach out to the *azaadi* leadership for unconditional talks.

The all-party delegation (APD) came, saw, met no one of consequence and returned from Srinagar having accomplished nothing. Even after being two months too late, the political parties representing the Parliament of India, for all their eloquence, achieved nothing to make the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led central government to stop the killing, maiming, blinding of people or the arrests and night raids. Word spinners of Hindutva passed the use of brute force as an act of “tough love,” where casualties are necessary in service of the “Indian nation,” so long as it is the Kashmiri Muslims who are affected. The APD was meant to fail, because it was a charade enacted by the BJP–Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) coalition, which has displayed no desire for a political resolution. The central government ruled by the RSS–BJP nexus calls the shots while Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti has no authority to prevent the use of pellet guns, let alone remove the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) or Disturbed Areas Act (DAA), and restore civil liberties of the people. Thus, in an atmosphere of lack of reason and understanding, we watch confusedly, if not helplessly, as the crisis in Kashmir spirals.

In a situation where trust is lacking, truth becomes a casualty of conflict, the quest for justice is jettisoned for impunity of the armed forces, and “development” results in further militarisation and financial dependence. It is then inevitable that the space for political resolution will shrink. The Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Finance Minister Haseeb Drabu on 4 September 2016 delivered a message of “peace and prosperity” on behalf of the state government, but did not utter a word about a political resolution.

He merely echoed what Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said on 9 August 2016

that “we [New Delhi and Mehbooba’s government] are trying to find a way through development. Those who cannot digest development have taken the road to destruction” (Ghatwai 2016). In his concluding remarks at the All Party Meeting on J&K on 12 August, Modi said that

(In order to provide employment immediately, the government has decided that 10 thousand Special Police Officers (SPOs), about 1200 Para Military and about 4000 candidates in 5 IR battalions will be recruited. In addition, about 1 lakh 25 thousand (1,25,000) persons will be trained under Udaan and HIMAYAT schemes so that unemployed people can get appropriate employment. (emphasis added) (Hindu 2016)

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley reiterated in Jammu on 21 August 2016 that there can be no compromise on national “security and integrity” and that the “focus should be on development.” The understanding of the ruling coterie makes it obvious that it is the RSS–BJP nexus which is setting the agenda. I believe the PDP lost any clout it enjoyed when Mufti found that a large number of her MLAs were prepared to part ways with her and form a government with the BJP without her. With her own support foundering within the PDP legislature party, her dependence on the RSS–BJP, and their clones in the cabinet is complete.

Waiting for Fatigue

The approach towards Kashmir is based on the assessment that this phase of the *azaadi* movement will tire itself out. It is assumed that once that happens, the separatists, especially the leaders, will be made to suffer by the authorities and will also begin to face the brunt of people’s frustration and rage at having achieved nothing. Therefore, it is held that there is no need for a political resolution. The underlying premise is that New Delhi will offer nothing. Underneath the empty *jumlas* of *Insaniyat*, *Jamhooriyat* and *Kashmiriyat* lurk smug arrogance. How else should one characterise the villainy of the jailor, who cocooned in “z plus” security, condemns the prisoners for lack of hospitality?

It is possible that some elements in Kashmir will turn their wrath on the *azaadi* movement, as Ikhwanis did in the past. However, people’s anger against

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the Indian state and the RSS–BJP nexus in particular, far outweighs any complaints they might have about the movement and its leadership. Thus, hoping for people to turn against the movement is wishful thinking, borne of self-deception and driven by self-interest.

Instead, it is more likely that this phase of civil disobedience will eventually result in the re-emergence of armed militancy. If the political stalemate continues, the Hizbul Mujahideen's (HM) Chairman Syed Salahuddin's warning that India should expect suicide attacks and the "entire region" would get engulfed in it, portends the state of things to come (Khan 2016).

Civilian fatalities have not abated. For instance, from 8 July to 25 August this year, 64 people were killed, 8,554 sustained injuries in firing by the security forces, 3,812 were hit by pellets, 2,343 by tear gas shells, 1,407 sustained pellet injuries in their eyes, 547 hit by bullets, and 880 injured by stone pelting by the forces (Yousef 2016).

Revival of Armed Militancy?

It is true that fatigue can eventually set in among the protestors. But the end of one phase of the movement does not automatically mean a gain for the state. It is not a zero-sum game. The people's mood to fearlessly persist with resistance will augment recruitment to armed militancy. We are at the cusp of the revival of a new phase of armed militancy in Kashmir. We should be convinced of this because all observers and commentators of the movement, including army commanders and intelligence officials have drawn attention to the mood of defiance and fearlessness in the people and especially the youth. This spirit was visible even before the killing of Burhan Muzaffar Wani on 8 July.

Consider the facts on the ground: out of the 600 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camps in J&K, 242 came under attack during this phase. Out of 36 police stations in Pulwama, Shopian, Kulgam and Anantnag, just three are functioning in Pulwama town, Rajpora and Awantipora. On 12 July 2016, the Damshali Hajipora police station was attacked and people took away 70 semi-automatic and

automatic rifles. Moreover, until 23 August 2016, 2,083 CRPF personnel had sustained injuries, leading a CRPF commander to warn that if there is no end to protests it will be difficult for them to "exercise restraint" (Tiwary 2016).

It is here that the indigenous character of the movement and militancy has to be understood. It is delusional to think that the movement is sponsored or managed by Pakistan. Instead, it is squarely a contribution of the Indian state and of a society which rejects the question of Kashmir's autonomy, believing that the people who have suffered egregiously at the hands of the Indian state need not be assuaged. Falsification is essential to the propaganda of counter-insurgency, and the Indian public should not get fooled by it.

The Indian government too should be better informed before formulating policies. It is the long history of manufactured lies and half-truths which has brought us to a stage where the writ of the Indian state is contested in Kashmir in ways which were unimaginable even three months ago.

Another aspect which has gone unaddressed is that the movement is no longer confined to Kashmir. The Kargil district and Jammu's Chenab Valley have also been affected. The very fact of crackdown on protesters, and arrests of people in Doda, Kishtwar, Rajouri and Poonch testify to this. Remarkably, neither the intelligentsia of Jammu's Hindu-dominated districts nor those of Ladakh have bothered to stand with their fellow state subjects facing brutalisation. In Zaskar Valley, Buddhist organisations have been enforcing a social boycott of local Muslims and the administration has done nothing to rectify this. By the time the militancy re-emerges, the communal polarisation in the entire J&K would be complete. Those who argue that the movement only comprises Kashmiri Sunni Muslims do not know of the ground reality. The dislike for RSS and BJP runs deep throughout J&K and has added to the resentment towards the Indian state among Muslims of all hues.

Those who still cling to the hope that a solution exists within the Indian Constitution have been unable to spell out

what they mean by it, let alone interact with the people of Kashmir unescorted by armed force. They therefore inspire little confidence in people. The operative larger reality is that a people have been forced to acquiesce to the diktats of a majoritarian India imposing its "nation state" project against their will. Kashmiri resistance in the past as well as in the present is formed in relation to, and in response to political developments in India. The Muslims of J&K, and in particular Kashmir, have been treated with a special abuse since 1953 by the Indian state and society.

From 1989 to 2016, J&K has changed. It was left to the general officer commanding-in-chief of the Northern Command to plead that all stakeholders, especially the "separatists," should come together to search for peace and solution. It is now accepted that the army cannot restore authority through brute force anymore and another brutal crackdown will result in a loss of discipline and morale. The Ministry of Home Affairs in New Delhi exercises a tight control over central paramilitary forces, and seems unconcerned with the fact that their personnel are teetering on the brink of fatigue and frustration. Perhaps their hearts and minds of paramilitary personnel have begun to question what they are required to do. That is why they have refused to let go of pellet guns. Pellet guns are as essential for the CRPF today as AFSPA is to the army. They need protection from a defiant people.

Sadly, India's democratic intelligentsia have forgotten Karl Marx's prophetic words that "religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress." When one sifts chaff from grain, the anguish, concern and aspirations of Kashmir's people reveal themselves as being utterly secular. The plight of the Kashmiri Pandits has been used as a justification for bloodletting of J&K's Muslims.

It is true that the azaadi movement can be blamed for not winning over non-Muslims in J&K. It can also be criticised for its lack of political foresight in not clamping down on elements who created fear and insecurity among Kashmiri Pandits by murders and rapes in 1989–91.

There are elements in Kashmir who harbour hatred for Kashmiri Pandits. But the azaadi movement has come a long way since the days of 1989–91. For example, Shabir Shah, called “Nelson Mandela” of Kashmir, when he was released after two decades of incarceration, went to migrant camps to meet the Kashmiri Pandits before returning to the Valley. And others from the azaadi movement followed.

Locating Exclusivity

A look at statements issued by Jammu-based leaders of BJP and those who are said to be representative voices of Kashmiri Pandits reveals hate politics. In my earlier piece (*EPW*, 13 August 2016), I recounted several instances where the militants of the azaadi movement have reached out to Kashmiri Pandits and the pilgrims of Amarnath Yatra. Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal’s piece (*EPW*, 6 August 2016) mentioned that Burhan Wani appealed to Kashmiri Pandits to return. Is this a characteristic of a fanatic who hates the “other”?

While BJP and some representatives of the Kashmiri Pandits like Panun Kashmir speak the language of exclusion and hate, the azaadi movement’s demand for the right to self determination considers all the state subjects of J&K—Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. They are not exclusivist but inclusive as far as their principal demand is concerned. Is there any such inclusiveness in the solutions prescribed by BJP and Panun Kashmir?

Organisations like Panun Kashmir that claim to represent Kashmiri Pandits, display no sensitivity or empathy towards Kashmiri Muslims suffering from atrocities inflicted by security forces. Even in the powerful memoir *Our Moon Has Blood Clots: A Memoir of a Lost Home in Kashmir* by Rahul Pandita, what is striking is the distrust of Kashmiri Muslims from a subjective perspective. The eulogisation of the pure bloodline of Kashmiri Pandits, laying claim to the entire heritage of Kashmir, and the disentiiling of those who belong to non-Brahminical castes and those who converted are noteworthy. To divest people of sacred and secular spaces because they converted is an abhorrent idea.

Shift in the Azaadi Movement

We have found it convenient to believe that the azaadi movement is an Islamist movement. We have convinced ourselves that since we are facing a religious war and not a political struggle for freedom, there is no need for sympathy or support for those demanding azaadi. The movement has not presented itself as waging a religious war. Instead, we must acknowledge the movement’s shift from armed militancy to an unarmed agitation in 2008 which was a deliberate and politically conscious step to reduce blood-letting. The modicum of restored civil liberties between 2003 and 2007 made non-violent methods more appealing. Indeed the trajectory of Hizbul Mujahideen, from a dogmatic organisation to one receptive to new ideas, from its pro-accession to Pakistan stance to that of azaadi, and its move away from public targets to military targets, all are hallmarks of change under the weight of popular concerns. The indigenous Hizbul Mujahideen is no longer what it was in the 1990s. Wani, its most popular face, represents this new phase.

In contrast, which Jammu-based organisation has reached out to Muslims? In 2008, when the same organisations imposed a month-long economic embargo, which was akin to an act of war, why did no one condemn this? In Jammu city, not even a hundred democrats could gather to express their anger at what is being done to their fellow state subjects by the Indian state. Why is it that fringe elements among Kashmiri Pandits advance pure-race versions of their Brahminical past, and liberals refuse to chastise them for such anachronistic and ahistorical posturing? Before demonising the Kashmiri resistance, a question needs to be raised: Why is it so difficult to express solidarity, lend meaning and provide strength to those who are for azaadi while at the same time remaining critical of some of their actions?

It is the woeful lack of freedom which has made the vast majority in J&K question the Indian intelligentsia’s claims of being a secular democracy. Indeed, why should Muslims in J&K alone carry the burden of remaining non-religious, secular, inclusive when all around them the

propagators of Hindutva are running amok, while secular democrats remain mute when crimes are committed in the name of the Indian nation state? A true commitment to democratic solution demands going beyond the surface reality to understand the truth, and not get carried away by instigators of violence on electronic media, and the bigots and jingoists they host.

In acknowledging our own fault lines, we save ourselves, and redeem ourselves as people. It is never too late to do the right thing. Once the Indian state takes the first steps—begins the process of demilitarisation, bans pellet guns, releases the detained and arrested persons and leaders, removes the DAA and restores civil liberties—it can reach out to the azaadi leadership for unconditional talks.

While speaking of the boundaries of the Constitution, we tend to forget what Jawaharlal Nehru said on 10 May 1951 in Parliament, while moving the first amendment which imposed restrictions on freedoms provided by Article 19 of the Constitution. He said that the Constitution is not sacrosanct or immutable. If the Constitution can be amended to restrict freedoms within 15 months of its formulation, then, by the same logic it can be amended to make the Directive Principles of State Policy justiciable, which, among other things, advocates peaceful democratic resolution of all conflicts. The Constitution can be further enriched to allow for a referendum on matters of utmost significance and where solutions have been elusive as in J&K, Manipur and Naga areas.

Indeed, this possibility holds the greatest promise to bring Indians together as a people and marginalise right-wing rabble-rousers and fear-mongers. When people are offered the democratic choice of a referendum they will repose confidence in a system which offers them this choice. Courage lies in taking a leap, not hiding behind smug arrogance based on make-belief ideas. To pander to baser instincts of fear and hatred of Pakistan and Muslims is to stick to the antiquated dogma of non-resolution which has spawned conflict, pain, loss, humiliation, and led us again and again to a cul-de-sac. Whether we like it or not, the right of self-determination remains the only viable democratic solution in Kashmir

today, by default as much as by preference. We too have a choice between freedom and oppression, because the azaadi movement refuses to be subdued or to submit to the Indian state any time soon.

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