

Kashmir: Return to Base

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Experience teaches us that often those sections of society who profit the most from historical change are the first to lament when calls go up for further change.

The fact, nonetheless is, as atleast one school of political epistemology recognizes, that nothing ever remains the 'same.' Entities, identities, social, cultural, political formations, other tropes of rigid thought,— all suffer, reconcile with, or invite mutation as the contradictory processes of history press upon them. Often seemingly diehard conundrums take on newer dimensions and possibilities, entailing new gains and new losses.

Thus, for example, the old 'Kashmir Problem' today is no longer the 'Kashmir Problem' of old. And, if it is-as my title might suggest-it is so in the same sense in which, in Christian theology, the alleged Fall from Paradise into sin, suffering, and death is, we are taught, a Fortunate Fall (Felix Culpa), calculated to give us a piquant understanding of what we lost in disobeying God. That understanding, then, carries the potential of making available to the willing not just the lost innocence but a heightened or higher version of it, an outcome which, crucially, could not have been possible without the experience of loss. In T.S.Eliot's moving words, "the thing to do is to return home/and to know the place for the first time"(Little Gidding).

The 'Kashmir Problem' which was indigenous to Kashmir and the Indian Centre as the Instrument of Accession was endorsed by a popular government in Kashmir, and as the Delhi Agreement of 1952 was signed between the centre and the state, acquired pressingly exogenous proportions with the decisive betrayal of democracy in Kashmir in 1987.

From that day when the sanctity of the ballot was brutally desecrated the 'Kashmir Problem' no longer remained merely a centre-state contention, as wide sections of Kashmiris began to think that only a divorce from the Union could bring to them the hope of a future which they could be masters of. Forces that had occupied shamefaced margins in the landscape of Kashmir's political evolution came boldly to occupy centre-stage.

The period between 1987 and 2006 has, however, seen in turn the exhaustion of the exogenous hope. However despairing the Kashmiri's experience with democracy-or the ruthless lack of it-might have been previous to 1987, their experience since then with 'politics by other means' has been even more calamitous. One is not here alluding just to the carnage, exodus, and immiseration; the heart of that experience has been the realization that exogenising the 'Kashmir Problem' has led to an intolerable snuffing out of the Kashmiri identity and of Kashmiri history itself. The assassination of Abdul Ghani Lone in 2002 at the hands of the exogenous puppeteers, indeed his martyrdom, was a clear signal that the 'Kashmir Problem' had yet again changed character.

That martyrdom should have been a call to all right-thinking (and the right-thinking know what is meant by 'right-thinking') Kashmiris to recognize that it is 'Kashmiriyat' after all which is seen as an obstacle by those who posture as Kashmir's saviours. If mainland India had failed to acknowledge the exceptional value of that Kashmiri historical reality, non-Kashmiri co-religionists across the LOC, in more brutal and uncaring ways, have sought to trample Kashmiriyat in a project of a mere 'Islamic' assimilation of the valley. Whatever further suffering these irreligious forces may inflict

upon Kashmiris, they have already failed. Within the valley, for instance, Syed Ali Shah Gilani is a very isolated leader.

Lone's martyrdom, therefore, furnished yet another opportunity to mainland India to set about constructing afresh a 'Naya Kashmir,' (or, 'New Kashmir', the nomenclature that Sheikh Abdullah gave to the National Conference Manifesto after the disenfranchisement of the erstwhile Maharaja) but this time without engaging in the taint of cunning and betrayal which marred the project between 1948 and 1987.

Whereas to any Kashmiri, even to the most alienated, Kashmiriyat is as instinctual and inevitable a reality as breathing itself-however they might deny this reality today under the impact of severe, sectarian pulls-it remains a misty concept to many non-Kashmiri Indians and Pakistanis. How, then, does one communicate the lived inwardness of the concept of Kashmiriyat to those who cannot experience it as a 'native' impulse, especially in a paragraph or two?

This 'tough ask' runs the risk of descending into cliché, although no cliché ever is without significance, indeed often deep significance. Perhaps the best way is to let some facts and events speak for themselves.

- When towards the last week of October, 1947, as muslim tribesmen supported by the then regular Pakistan army made the first putsch to grab the valley by force, little Kashmiri children (I was then six, and vividly recall the experience) with little wooden sticks in hand marched in disciplined little rows through the streets of Srinagar shouting, under the aegis of the National Conference flag, the Haldar, 'hamla aavar khabardaar, hum Kashmiri hein tayaar' (beware invader, we Kashmiris are ready for you) and 'shere Kashmir kaa kya irshaad, Hindu, Muslim, sikh itihaad,' (what does the lion of Kashmir enjoin?-Hindu, Muslim, Sikh unity) they were expressing Kashmiriyat;

- when the twenty five year old muslim youth, Sherwaani, misguided the 'muslim' raiders in Baramullah for three momentous days, preventing their assault on Srinagar city (before there were any Indian forces to the rescue) he was defending Kashmiriyat, and when he was finally nailed alive by the enemy he became the first voluntary martyr to Kashmiriyat; just as Brigadier Usman was to give his life on the Uri front to save Kashmiriyat;

- when my own daayi maa, (nurse mother) a six-footer amazon named Zunat, nambardaar (local village revenue official) of Wadipora village, three miles from Handwara, saved, single-handedly, several Kashmiri Pandit families she was safeguarding Kashmiriyat;

- when Jinnah was hounded out of Kashmir along with his communal proposition (1944), it was Kashmiriyat standing up to theocracy;

- or, when Gandhi, in the thick of the communal holocaust of 1946 in the wake of independence and the division of the country, said that Kashmir offered the only 'light' he was paying tribute to Kashmiriyat;

- when the great Sheikh (Abdullah) said to the Kashmir Constituent Assembly (1950) that a 'Sufi-secular Kashmir could have nothing to do with a theocratic Pakistan' he was making a formal enunciation of Kashmiriyat;

- when non-Vaishnavite Kashmiri Pandits incorporated as inseparable part of their most sacred festival, Shivratri, a further day of celebration called Salaam they were embracing Kashmiriyat.

- Remember also the rather astonishing fact that the Mughals who are looked upto by most Indian

muslims are written down in Kashmir's history as 'invaders', and the resistance put up to them by chieftans like Yusuf Shah Chak made the stuff of Kahmiri folklore;

- and remember also that, even as I write,. six to eight thousand Kashmiri Pandits-many known to me personally— still reside in the valley with no communally demarcated 'borders' (unlike in Gujarat) to set them off from their muslim brothers and sisters, and suffering no exclusive fears. And that many Kashmiri Pandits have been revisiting Hindu shrines and temples to the accompaniment of deeply moving support from Kashmiri muslims, while muslim icons are systematically desecrated or destroyed in Vadodra and Ahmedabad— all of that betokens the meaning of Kashmiriyat and its triumphs.

Where, then, does this lead us? If it is the case today that very few Kashmiris would want to carry on with India as if nothing had happened, it is equally true that not more than a miniscule would want to go join Pakistan.

This is a moment when every secular-democratic Indian nationalist must recognize that a credible and guaranteed secular-democracy in Kashmir is as fatally a requirement to salvage Kashmiriyat as it is, indeed, to make secular-democracy credible throughout the Union of India. Kashmir must have its due; and the compelling beginning to make that happen is, without succumbing any longer to any hegemonic-centrist or sectarian-communal sickness, to return to the terms and conditions of the Instrument of Accession.

Let it also be said that after the Pokhran/Chagai events (when both countries exploded nuclear bombs), India and Pakistan have achieved two related results: they have foreclosed the option to go to war, and they have made international concern an inevitable party to the 'Kashmir Problem.' The Kargil confrontation and its inevitable closure was the clearest evidence of those results.

If India must understand that it has a problem to address in Kashmir, Pakistan must understand as well that even endless years of proxy attrition cannot deliver Kashmir to it. Therefore, even as the Indian centre must forthwith and without prevarication begin to attend to the Autonomy question, together, India and Pakistan must devise institutional mechanisms to make that Autonomy an abiding political future for Kashmir on both sides of the LOC. And it is along these axes of possibility that concerned international opinion must operationalize its activity in both countries, equally without succumbing to any imperialist temptation to obtain a mangled, Iraq-like hold on the region.

It is only when Kashmir is returned to the Kashmiris, and appropriate devolutionary provisions within an Autonomous dispensation made available to all provinces of the undivided state, such as may perceptibly meet their felt needs, that Lone's martyrdom as a symbolic throwback to Kashmir's proud struggles between 1930 and 1953 can be translated into a new future for Kashmir, the rest of India, and Pakistan.

Indeed, such a course can also provide the most lasting resolution of the qualities of infamy that we have experienced in Gujarat, as well as suggest creative and humane ways to the dictatorship in Pakistan of how to resolve Kashmir-like aspirations in its own two provinces of Baluchistan and the NWFP.

P.S.

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