

## EMPOWERING THE KASHMIRIS

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### EDITOR'S NOTE

*Iftikhar Gilani is a leading journalist from the state of Jammu and Kashmir. He has firsthand account of the rise of militancy in the state when he was working with the popular English daily, Kashmir Times. He has faced difficulties in personal life for being an articulate, objective voice on the Kashmir situation. Issue of militancy in the state of J&K is often mentioned as Asia's hottest flashpoint between two nuclear-armed neighbors. The state appears as the crown in the relief map of Indian subcontinent and as the head of the Himalayan ranges that runs southeastwards, branching further down from Assam into the Bay of Bengal. Resolving crisis in Kashmir is akin to stabilizing the Himalayan arc. In this paper, Iftikhar Gilani proposes the harmonious regional development through devolution of political power as panacea for the continuing imbroglio.*

**Keywords:** alienation, Amarnath, CBM insurgency, Ladakh, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), regional development.

### INTRODUCTION

Insurgencies as well as popular unrests are generally rooted in political, social and economic deprivations, which in turn lead to the alienation and estrangement of a community. In Kashmir this alienation and unrest date back to, and are linked with, the events that led to partition of the sub-continent or its accession to the Indian Union. A popular sentiment seeking empowerment of the Muslim Kashmiris of the state was there for over past five centuries and it took firm roots during the Dogra rule (1846-1947). In some areas like Poonch, Mirpur, Gilgit and Muzaffarabad, Muslims of the state had taken to armed rebellion against the Dogra kings. History is full of political deprivation and poverty of Kashmiri people during most of the time of their subjugation by the Mughals, the Pathans, the Sikhs and later the Dogras.

Ironically, this estrangement continued even under the democratic rule after the Accession; while other Indian states prospered, Jammu and Kashmir has been haunted by political instability. It has turned into a landlocked region with its connections with the external world as well as other areas within the state severely impaired by heavy military presence. This has inevitably led to a feeling of insecurity and alienation amongst the people. Surprisingly, almost 67-summers later, there is little or no realization in New Delhi about the depth of the Kashmiri estrangement. Most attempts to understand its causes often get bogged down in the debates about accession, and India-Pakistan relations. All the cures prescribed over the years have failed miserably. Prof. Hiren Mukherjee wrote, "Even today, perhaps the best of us do not quite realize the depth of Kashmiri alienation and are unready to ponder ways and means of overcoming it." (*The Times of India*, February 25, 1994). Even several staunch proclaimed pro-India leaders from the state have not taken care to bridge this gap between New Delhi and the people of Kashmir. Instead, they have chosen to stoke the fires whenever they have gone out of power. For example, on November 19, 2007 (in Jammu) and later December 5, 2007 (in Srinagar), the former Union Minister Dr. Farooq Abdullah raised doubts at the legality and utility of Accession. This was also the case with his father Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, who played a major role in the process of accession.

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Chronic political instability coupled with a fatal mix of repression, corruption, electoral fraud and denial of basic rights by leaders of the state known for their links to New Delhi, have led to popular rebellions in the past, i.e., the Hazratbal holy relic controversy in 1963, the massive electoral fraud in 1987, Amarnath land row agitation in 2008, the public outcry on rape and murder of two women in Shopian in 2009 and the popular uprising in June 2010. Mere propaganda by "fundamentalists" or the external hand cannot foster and sustain popular insurgencies for long. As noted author on Kashmir affairs A. G. Noorani stated: "*India produced the alienation, Pakistan provided the gun*". The alienation has only deepened over the last two decades.

This also explains why many Kashmiri parties have failed to own their responsibility for the mess they often create leaving New Delhi to manage the crisis on its own. Rather they choose either to flee the scene or to side with the people for their political gains. The Amarnath land row in 2008 saw both the National Conference (NC) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) siding with the separatists. In 1989, then Chief Minister Dr. Farooq Abdullah not only resigned but took the next flight to London leaving New Delhi high and dry to take on agitating people and the rising militancy.

## THE POLITICAL DIVISION IN KASHMIR

The political landscape in Kashmir is broadly divided into two camps— anti-India and anti-New Delhi or anti-Centre. Genuine pro-India nationalist parties like the Congress and the BJP are still to find roots in majority of the population, though they may have won few seats in the elections. Fortunately for New Delhi, anti-India camp has always remained divided since 1947. The radical Muslim Conference lost its grip with the flight of its top leadership, like Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas and Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah, to Pakistan after the Lashkar invasion of Kashmir in 1947. The moderate anti-Delhi camp led by National Conference (NC) claimed sole leadership politically till the emergence of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the late 1990s. Both these parties emphasize on Kashmiri nationalism and identity and favour limited accession with India. But in the event of any mass agitation, lines of division between these two camps get blurred. Both the NC and the PDP have never attempted to bring Kashmiri populace close to Indian mainstream, even though they assumed power and ruled with the blessings of New Delhi.

The current Chief Minister Omar Abdullah wrote about his own uncle and NC General Secretary Sheikh Nazir Ahmed few years ago, and mentioned how he hated the words 'India' and 'Indian'. He says in his blog for example:

*"I have an uncle who more often than not I disagree with but I admire the conviction he has - he disagrees with what happened in 1947 and subsequent events and so refuses to carry a passport. He has never applied for one. For the longest time he never left the state and only travelled by road between Jammu and Srinagar because he refused to travel on 'Indian' Airlines."*

Addressing this estrangement needs a variety of sustained multi-track initiatives, both in the realm of security and political affairs of the state. In 2002, Government of India tried to provide a semblance of respect for the people's verdict, which ended the monopoly of National Conference (NC) as being the sole political face of India in Kashmir. A strict message from Delhi was given to ensure free and fair elections. Though participation was not very high, at least the process continued. After cohabitation with the PDP for one term (2002-2008), the Congress party which ran the UPA coalition at the centre chose to enter into an alliance with the NC after the 2008 elections. But, this month the alliance with NC has broken after change in power equation at the centre.

## THE POLITICAL CAUSES

As per 2001 census, Kashmir Valley had a population of 5.4 million. The total number of electorates in November 2008 was 32,60,663. In the last elections, the PDP got 28.5 per cent of popular votes, but got only 21 seats, whereas the NC got 27.5 per cent votes, and bagged 28 seats. There is also a perception in the valley that Omar Abdullah was selected as the Chief Minister not by his party or the people of the state but the inner coteries within the Congress party in New Delhi. It was rumoured that young but influential Congress leaders like Sachin Pilot (who happens to be Omar Abdullah's brother in law) and Rahul Gandhi had already declared Omar as their chief ministerial candidate before the elections. In fact, two months before the polls in October 2008, former intelligence Chief A. S. Dulat, a long-time friend of the Abdullaha, had declared Omar as the CM, in a TV show, which NC had strongly contested. It is strange that there was nobody to point out to the young guns in Congress that historically, the coalition between NC and Congress has always proved disastrous for Kashmir. Coincidentally, Sachin Pilot's father, Late Rajesh Pilot had scripted the famous Rajiv-Farooq accord 20 years ago, which had also proved catastrophic for the state and gave birth to militancy. The pattern was repeated in 2013 elections and ascendance of junior Abdullah in political spectrum of J&K is complete.

## **GOVERNANCE DEFICIT**

On September 13, 2010 the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in its meeting in New Delhi acknowledged “trust deficit” and “governance deficit” as two big problems afflicting the state and leading to political turmoil. Ironically, the CBMs announced a fortnight later did not announce any step to bridge the “governance deficit”. Though, Kashmir has never been a well-governed state, the absence of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah from the capital at crucial moments has made the situation worse.

Moreover, Omar’s the then alliance partner, the Congress party, started openly questioning his style of functioning. His Ladakh trip in the last week of June 2010, when Srinagar was on boil had jilted the administration. And instead of returning to Srinagar from Ladakh, he reportedly switched off his wireless set and his mobile phone and drove away with his family to Kulu-Manali. After five days, he rang up his office for a helicopter to be sent to Manali to airlift him. There is even talk about the state helicopter making nine sorties to airlift relatives of Payal Singh, wife of the Chief Minister, for visiting Ladakh monasteries.

Again, when Srinagar was up in flames in July 2010, CM was spending his weekend in Gulmarg. But this time, he took the helicopter on Sunday morning, reached Srinagar and headed cabinet meeting at the airport itself. The Cabinet meeting ordered transfer of the SSP of Srinagar. And after the meeting, he returned to Gulmarg in the same helicopter to spend rest of the weekend there.

Omar Abdullah may be an ideal nationalist and a secular Muslim show boy for New Delhi, but his acceptability is very low in the state, and especially in the valley. There is a constant refrain in the valley that even after having spent 10 years in politics, he is unable to speak Kashmiri, and, therefore, cannot effectively communicate with his cadres and local people.

There is also strong perception in Srinagar today that no amount of CBM would work in Kashmir in the absence of governance. The primary problem of a shaky and irresponsive administration has to be addressed on an urgent basis. Rather than expecting the intermittent unrest to die down due to fatigue, the central government should ensure redressal of the genuine grievances of the people on a proactive basis.

Besides governance, the CBMs introduced by New Delhi have not answered the popular clamour for justice and dignity. People in the valley allege that 15 police personal were suspended for throwing a shoe at the CM, while no action has been taken against any erring security personnel for killing over 100 people. Anantnag was a case of gross highhandedness, where even the CM admitted that the two boys had been shot dead inside their houses in cold blood. But, instead of bringing the police officer to justice, he was transferred out of Anantnag to Srinagar. No action was taken against any official in a similar case in the state, simply because the person leading the arson happened to be a block level president of the ruling NC.

Interestingly, Omar Abdulla told a selected group of journalists some years ago that he had unmatched access to the power corridors of Delhi, the kind of access no Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir had ever enjoyed in the past. So he believed he was the best suited to settle the issue of Kashmir. He also claimed that the Congress president had promised him every support even at the cost of her own party’s interest in the state. This may be true because, despite his grave mistakes, Omar had not suffered the fate of his predecessors from Khawja Shamsuddin to Farooq Abdullah who were shown the door for even minor follies. It is well known that then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had also packed Bakhshi Ghulam Mohammad out of Kashmir politics following the agitation over the theft of the holy relic in 1963, on the advice of B N Mulick, then chief of Intelligence Bureau.

## **WHAT AILS KASHMIR?**

Kashmiri Muslims suffer from a psychological, emotional, political and historical complex which prompts them to believe that they have been progressively disempowered over the past 450-years. India has so far failed to address this problem even under a democratic system. Kashmiri Muslim sub-nationalism could have existed within the idea of India as Tamil, Telugu or Bengali nationalism. Unlike rest of country, however, Kashmiris still feel they are reeling under ‘occupation’. The Kashmiris had a hero in Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. But they now feel that even he could not bring dignity to them. He had his chances during a time when the machinations of the forces from across the border were at an all time low. However, his dictatorial manners and his aversion for dissent came in the way of consolidation of democratic process in the state. He left a flawed legacy which led to popular alienation, primarily because of the corrupt and venal administration by the NC government headed by his son and the massive electoral rigging of 1987. Forces across the border were only too pleased to fish in troubled waters; the militancy they introduced in Kashmir continues till today.

Nevertheless, there were moments of glory too. Kashmir has witnessed free and fair elections in 1977 and 2002; and it had shown results. But no effort was made to capitalize on those brief periods of sanity. If Shiekh Abdullah squandered it away in 1977, the Congress party in the state has harmed its prospects by aligning with the NC, especially after a rather successful alliance with PDP.

### PRISONER'S MINDSET

Another pertinent issue in Kashmir is that of a prisoner's mindset. It is not just because of the presence of the security forces, but because of closing of traditional routes linking it with the external world. Traditional crafts of Kashmir whether shawl or carpets, still depend on raw materials exported from or smuggled through Nepal from Tibet, China and Gilgit. Shahtoosh (king of fine wool) has become extinct as there was no access to the areas where captive breeding Chiru or wild goat can take place. Cross-border linkages encouraged by the governments of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh might result in legal trade in such raw materials quite vital for the growth of the local handicraft industry in Kashmir.

### REGIONAL EMPOWERMENT

Decentralising powers to different regions of Kashmir through regional councils could play a great role in overall empowerment of the population. In 1993 a notification issued by then Governor established a regional council in Ladakh. The idea was extended in 2002 to Kargil. These councils have been quite successful in meeting regional aspirations. There is a need to extend this experiment to other regions and sub-regions. It may be useful to set up at least six more council, i.e., three each in Jammu and Kashmir regions. This may go a long way in addressing the issue of regional disparity. The separatists may then be encouraged to contest in these local councils which will help the process of mainstreaming of these forces. An ideal way could be to follow Northern Ireland lesson in this process. The regions suggested here are:

**Table 1: Decentralizing Power Through New Councils**

Name of the Region	Sub-region	Ethnic Dominance
Kashmir Valley	North Kashmir	Mixed population
	South Kashmir	Kashmiri dominated
	Central Kashmir	Kashmiri dominated
Jammu Region	Poonch-Rajouri	Gujaar dominated
	Peerpanchal Doda, Kishtwar	Pahari dominated
	Jammu-Kathua, Udampur	Dogra dominated

Devolution of power through regional councils will also enable local communities to address their own grievances through their representatives. This will put paid to allegations of dominance or bullying by one community over the other in the system.

Such innovative initiatives must be taken up in a sustained and consistent manner, which may help address the issue of progressive estrangement of the population. As noted journalist Ajit Bhattacharjee writes, "Events have made it clear that people of Kashmir are alienated from New Delhi and will not accept its domination. They have lost faith in New Delhi's word. At the same time, resentment is growing against militants, and their Pakistani supporters, for the sufferings they have brought without achieving anything. Therefore, an effective self-governance without amounting to secession from India is need of the hour." The time has really come for empowering the people of the Jammu and Kashmir through realistic and practicable steps. New Delhi, Islamabad and Kashmiris must contribute to this process in the interest of peace.