

# Democracy as the Best Antidote to Terrorism

## Mufti's "Healing Touch" Proves Efficacy in Kashmir

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For a long period the people of Kashmir were burning with rage on account of a series of rigged elections, uncontrolled corruption and political highhandedness. These abuses gave legitimacy to a secessionist-terrorist upsurge that Pakistan instigated and supported. The national media in India virtually abandoned the Valley during the violence and mainly just published propagandist press releases issued by the government and the Army establishment as news without any attempt to verify the veracity of those reports through their own independent investigations. This further eroded the faith of Kashmiri people in Indian democracy. During those dark days, a few human rights activists and concerned freelance journalists went and met the people of Kashmir, took note of their grievances, and tried to record charges of human rights violations as well as understand the socio-political causes that made the otherwise peace loving Kashmiris endorse terrorist politics. MANUSHI also contributed in a small way to this endeavor by presenting the grievances of estranged Kashmiris to concerned citizens and policy makers in India<sup>1</sup>. Such gestures helped build bridges of communication between Kashmir and the rest of India at a time when government policy attempted to isolate Kashmiris and leave the job of



Hundreds of people brave bullets to extend open welcome for Mufti's election meeting in a bazaar of Srinagar

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combating the insurgency mainly to the Army and paramilitary forces.

It was another matter that the Pakistani establishment made extensive use of our reports to caricature India's Kashmir policy, launch an international propaganda war that India was trampling upon the democratic rights of Kashmiris and justify its arming of *jehadis* to "liberate" Kashmir. The militants also felt emboldened that their cause was being legitimized by known and respected human rights activists of India. Many of us (including me) often took Kashmiri accounts at face value and published them as "non-partisan" reports in good faith.

In those bloody days it was impossible to carry out genuine investigations into various allegations of excesses by either the security forces or the terrorists. In the process many truths, half-truths and

exaggerations came to be projected together as "facts". Whatever the limitations of our reports of those unhappy days, they were a necessary corrective simply because for long years most of the mainstream newspapers reneged on their responsibilities and presented a very one-sided picture.

### Opting for Democracy

Today Kashmiri people in increasing numbers are braving the writ of terrorists and risking their lives in their attempts to marginalize secessionist leaders who count on Pakistan supported terror brigades to enforce their political agenda on the people of Kashmir. This is evident in the unprecedented voter turnout for the recent municipal elections and the participation of a large number of women candidates for the first time ever in J&K. Even Delhi has never witnessed a 70-80 percent voter turnout in municipal elections, as

<sup>1</sup> See "Voices from Kashmir" in MANUSHI No. 83 and "We need a Surgeon's Knife not a Butcher's" in No. 103. Also available in *Religion at the Service of Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

happened in many constituencies in Kashmir this time. Areas where there used to be zero percent or negligible polling in earlier elections have witnessed huge turnouts, reaching as high as 89 percent. This has happened despite a severe winter, despite Id and Republic Day related tension, despite the call for a poll boycott by the Hurriyat, despite assassinations of several leaders and candidates and numerous grenade attacks on poll meetings by militants allied to the Hurriyat. Braving bullets and grenades, all ministers of the government as well as senior party leaders carried out a vigorous campaign urging voters to exercise their democratic right.

It is unfortunate that the terrorists have now begun killing elected candidates, including one who was expected to become the mayor of Srinagar. They have forced some others to resign under threat of death in order to sabotage the democratic verdict of the Kashmiri people. Some have had to take shelter away from their own homes and neighbourhoods, while others have been forced to issue advertisements in local newspapers or appear in Friday meetings in mosques to ask forgiveness for having participated in the elections and to promise to dissociate themselves from their respective political parties on whose ticket they fought the election.

The unprecedented voter turnout, notwithstanding the threats by Pak-supported *jehadis*, has rattled the Pakistani establishment. They are now likely to demand an increase in the scale of violence from their agents. It is noteworthy that the last phase of polling, which took place after the assassinations of four elected candidates, nevertheless recorded a turnout of about 70 percent, an even higher average than in the earlier three phases, though these polls were held in areas considered

terrorist strongholds. This suggests that voters are telling *jehadis* that they do not wish to be led by the gun any more. Pakistan rulers can no longer claim with the same ease before the international community that pro-Pakistan secessionist outfits, like the Hurriyat, alone represent the aspirations of the Kashmiri people. Nor are they likely to be believed, as in the past, when they claimed that India was holding down Kashmiris from joining Pakistan through brute force.

### **Stereotypes that Harm**

Many human rights activists took great pains to try and understand what contributed to the horror in Kashmir during the period when respect for human rights in Kashmir was at its lowest ebb. We should be paying equal attention to understanding the factors that are now contributing to such a major change in people's mood and attitudes as reflected in the increased voter turnout in election after election after the PDP led coalition came to power in October 2002. Unfortunately, the Indian media – both print and television – are manifesting a curious and dangerous obsession. They focus only on bad news from

Kashmir, while ignoring positive developments. This demoralises many of those working hard to restore peace and democracy in J&K, who are risking their own lives as well as endangering the security of their families

### **Cause for Optimism**

Ever since the October 2002 elections, there has been a steady improvement in the political situation and mood of the people in the Valley because the PDP led government, despite all its limitations and flaws, is popularly perceived as providing a more responsive government than the State has witnessed before. Many new development projects have been initiated, and investments have begun to trickle in. *Hartaals* in the Valley are no longer as regular an occurrence. The Chief Minister has personally worked hard to revive tourism and has actually taken it to new heights. Despite the fear of terrorist attacks, a record 9 to 10 lakh tourists – including 5 lakh pilgrim tourists to Amarnath – visited the Valley last year, the highest number ever. Even in pre-militancy days, the figure never crossed 7 lakh. Serious attempts are being made to bring Kashmiri Pandits back home, with



**Women and children listening to an election speech in an outlying neighbourhood of Srinagar, February 27, 2005**

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**Mufti presiding over Independence Day, 2004 celebrations in Srinagar attended by 20,000 people plus children who presented songs and dances**

both the State and the Central Government providing them rehabilitation packages. The hitherto neglected Jammu and Ladakh regions have been given better representation and a stronger voice. In the last two years more work has been done on the Jammu-Srinagar railway line than was done in the previous 20 years. Land for the railway line was acquired and compensation given to villagers within months – that too without any protests over bungling and corruption. Yet, Delhi’s metro has made a million times more news than the rail line being built in a tough terrain which will build a vital new efficient, all weather link between Srinagar and the rest of India. It hit the headlines only when terrorists killed one of the engineers and work came to a halt. No one paid attention to how and when the work was resumed. It is unfortunate that Kashmir becomes front-page news only when there is a bomb explosion, a grenade attack or dramatic encounters between security forces and *jihadis*.

### **Obsession with Bad News**

This partiality for negative news hit me yet again when I visited Kashmir starting January 25<sup>th</sup> to

witness how Kashmiris were responding to attempts at reviving democratic institutions at the municipal level. The contrast between what I saw at the ground level and the coverage of the Valley in our national media is worrisome.

For example, for almost all the national and regional papers, the big news of the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of January was: “Mehbooba Mufti escapes grenade attack.” Nor a single paper went on to report how, despite the attack, Mehbooba, along with her PDP colleague Gulam Hasan Mir, did not suspend the election campaign and went on to address several more public meetings on that very day as well as on following days. It was heartening to see hundreds of people, including women, teenage girls and little children, come out to listen to them in the *mohallas* and villages they visited. Each one of these meetings was attended by several hundred people. This was happening at the very same time when many people were expecting the militants to successfully enforce their boycott of Republic Day celebrations through dramatic acts of terror.

Not too long ago, only officials and armed forces would attend flag

hoisting on Republic Day because people felt seriously estranged from the Indian political system and Pakistani *jihadis* were able to convince many Kashmiris that any association with India was a betrayal of the Kashmiri cause.

After the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) came to power, the Independence Day celebrations of 2003 witnessed the participation of 15,000-20,000 people in Srinagar alone. After a 15 year hiatus, school children, including teenage girls, sang and danced at the August 15 celebrations, defying the writ of the terrorists. Not too long ago, even politicians from mainstream pro-Indian parties – such as the Congress and the National Conference – did not dare be publicly associated with such symbolic gestures of allegiance to the Indian Union. In 2003 and 2004 Republic Day ceremonies were presided over by senior ministers in every district headquarter of the Valley with attendance ranging from 2,000 to 6,000. There were nearly 20,000 people at the main event in Srinagar in 2004.

This year, because of the impending municipal elections, the parties of the ruling coalition did not want to risk inviting the wrath of militants by mobilizing large-scale participation for January 26 in Srinagar, lest the elections, which were barely four days after Republic Day, get derailed. Yet, thousands of people spontaneously attended the celebrations in district headquarters despite the fact that the separatist leaders and their *jehadi* comrades, as usual, had issued a call for boycott. This was the first incident free Republic Day in the Valley.

Very few people outside Kashmir have yet noticed these changes in Kashmir because newspaper reports failed to highlight what a major breakthrough it represented. Some even gave Republic Day the kind of

coverage that would cheer the heart of militants. *The Times of India* dubbed it a “Black Day in Kashmir” because “thousands of people in Kashmir stayed at home in the capital Srinagar to mark Republic Day as a ‘Black Day’” and went on to say that similar shutdowns were reported in other towns. *The Hindustan Times* declared that “Srinagar turned into a fort on Republic Day” and emphasized that searches were carried out by the army as a precautionary measure.

### What Was Missed Out

Those who interpreted the closure of shops and absence of movement during Republic Day ceremonies on the streets of Srinagar on January 26, 2005 as proof of the continuing dominance of militants in the Valley seem to have forgotten that even in the capital of India, as well as in most towns and cities in the rest of the country, streets are deserted because all business and official establishments have to be kept compulsorily closed for that period during Republic Day. Very little public transport is available and therefore, most people do stay indoors, even in cities like Delhi. What ought to have made news is that as soon as the Republic Day celebrations were over, the streets of Srinagar and other towns in J&K did not remain deserted; even the election campaign was resumed.

In a Valley which was so dominated for 15 long years by the fear of death that even young men dared not hang around in the public spaces, where the mere sight of a jeep carrying security forces would make villagers hide in fright, the presence of women and children listening to election speeches ought to have been celebrated as a good omen. When women feel emboldened enough to come with children to attend political meetings, that is a bigger statement

of faith in peace and democracy, than any amount of slogan shouting.

Similarly, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Srinagar a few months ago, our national TV channels kept obsessively relaying images of a *fidayeen* attack. One of the channels on its own went ahead and announced that the public rally to be addressed by the Prime Minister had been cancelled, causing a great deal of confusion for the local people. Not one channel or newspaper celebrated the fact that despite guns booming barely a furlong away from the venue of the Prime Minister’s meeting, nearly 20,000 to 25,000 people stayed to listen to Manmohan Singh, and several thousand more from far away places kept coming in even after the PM’s speech was over. For hours on end we saw live coverage of the gun battle but not one channel bothered to show the expectant faces who had patiently gathered in such large numbers, nor asked the thousands who had gathered at the risk of their lives to explain what motivated them to come at such risk or gave them the courage to stay back to hear the Prime Minister of a country from which not too long ago they wanted to secede.

Yet again, when there was a *fidayeen* attack on Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad’s house, the TV channels promptly told the viewers that the CM and his family had been whisked away under heavy security cover to safer places. Mufti was actually in Patna. His family had stayed in the house without any panic. Mufti says that when he returned from Patna later in the day he was amused to find how normal the town, including his own neighbourhood, looked. He saw children playing cricket in a neighbouring field and all the shops in the vicinity of the CM’s residence, had stayed open. But the TV channels only gave images of attack and contingents of security men outside the CM’s residence. Therefore, he asked that the security contingents be reduced so that media attention did not stay riveted on them.

### Consequences of Media Failure

That the local press, working under the heavy incessant pressure of militant groups, with many local journalists on the payroll of Pakistani agencies, whose interest is served only by bad news, would indulge in negative reporting that generates fear



Chief Minister’s election meeting for a woman candidate (standing next to him) in the Natipora bazaar, Srinagar, February 27, 2005

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**Large gatherings at election meetings despite grenade attacks and terrorist threats**

and panic is understandable. However, when the bias is reflected in the national press, it makes one wonder why the media focus mainly on negative reporting from Kashmir, which keeps alive the stereotype of Kashmiri Muslims as rabid *jehadis*.

It is unfortunate that the courage and determination of those who are risking their very lives to combat the culture of violence and terror, those who are working hard to restore people's faith in democracy and revitalize institutions of governance in Kashmir, do not get even a tiny fraction of the media coverage given to Sania Mirza's nose ring and attire. This charming 18 year old is projected as a national icon and role model for India's youth all because she plays good tennis in international tournaments. As a consequence, our No.1 national paper invites her to be the guest editor of their newspaper. It will not be long before she is treated as an expert on every conceivable topic – from dams to defence, from economic policy to foreign affairs.

By contrast, a woman like Mehbooba Mufti is noticed only after a grenade attack on her. She is then asked for a few sound bytes to comment on whether the PDP's work

for peace has been derailed. Very few have bothered to highlight how her example has motivated thousands of young women, including girls barely out of their teens, to contest municipal elections and to consider politics as a respectable option in Kashmir, where traditionally women have been kept away from politics. The fact that she maintains contacts with people throughout the State, that she travels to remote terrorism affected villages and *mohallas*, despite serious threats to her life, has emboldened numerous

young women to stand for municipal elections with active support of their families and community.

There are serious consequences for the rest of the nation that arise out of the media's failure to highlight the increasing rejection of terrorist politics by Kashmiri Muslims. For example, activists working for reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims following the Gujarat riots are finding it difficult to convince prejudiced Hindus that all Muslims do not endorse the politics of *jehadis* while media fails to highlight the efforts of those working to strengthen peace and democracy in Kashmir. Therefore, Hindus all over the country have come to believe that wherever Muslims are in the majority, or come to acquire a significant numerical strength, they inevitably turn *jehadis*, eliminate Hindus and try to create many more Pakistans.

This makes the task of building bridges between estranged Hindus and Muslims much harder. We need to recognise that the fate of democracy in India is inextricably linked to restitution of peace and democracy in Kashmir, a peace that will also enable the Kashmiri Pandits to return to the Valley.

URBAN LOCAL BODIES ELECTIONS of 2002 and 2005 (Comparative Poll Percentages)		
District	Percentage of votes polled in corresponding Assembly Segments in October 2002	Percentage of votes polled in Local Body Elections in 2005
Baramula	35.03%	45%
Kupwara	53.57%	87%
Srinagar	5.06%	20%
Badgam and Ganderbal		70% (after killing of 4 candidates)
Anantnag	24.08%	34%
Pulwama	22.67%	55%
Jammu	55.57%	74.73%
Kathua	60.57%	80.83%

## Charges of Rigged Election

It is ironical that some National Conference (NC) leaders, especially their President, Omar Abdullah, leveled charges of vote rigging against the PDP. It is well known that the NC, which once enjoyed huge popular support, in recent years has become an object of disdain for large sections of the Kashmiri people, especially its youth. This is because of vast corruption, mismanagement and authoritarian ways of handling citizen's disgruntlement when it was in power as well as its own love for capturing power through rigged elections. Not surprisingly, NC is feeling rattled by the democratic assertion of the citizens of J&K, and is joining the separatist Hurriyat leaders in questioning the poll verdict, alleging large-scale rigging. This newfound love between the NC leadership and Hurriyat leaders is a clear indication that the two serve each other's interests well in this situation. Both are upset at the steady improvement in the political situation in J&K after Mufti Mohammad Sayeed assumed power and is in turn trying to devolve more power to the people.

If there had been large-scale rigging we would not have seen so many first time entrants and independents win elections, indicating that people in *mohallas* often chose their own candidates who they think would serve their interests better. Even while PDP, as a mere five-year-old party, has given the best performance, they have not swept in every region and constituency of the Valley. Voters were able to elect candidates with a much larger range of political opinion than were ever before allowed an electoral presence in Kashmir. It is a common experience that rigging of polls is easier where there is a low turnout.

A large presence of voters make outright bungling extremely hazardous, especially in a politically surcharged atmosphere like Kashmir's, where people immediately engage in street protests over such fraud. PDP has acquired majorities with high voter turn out even in areas believed to be terrorist strongholds where there used to be total poll boycotts.

In almost all the elections prior to October 2002, poll rigging became a major cause of disenchantment with Indian democracy. This time complaints against malpractices are confined to a few booths and directed at local workers of all parties, including those in the opposition. The voter turn out would not have kept increasing with every phase of the poll if the PDP as the ruling party were popularly perceived as having rigged the elections. During the earlier regimes, there would be allegations that the security forces coerced reluctant people into voting. This time many people were upset because they did not find their names on the electoral rolls, which could not be updated in an efficient and timely manner because of threats by militants who targetted government

functionaries in charge of preparing voters' lists. This was indeed a serious limitation of this election, one that legitimately caused some resentment.

The popular perception in the Valley was that the NC would gain from a low voter turnout because that is how traditionally they have won elections. The NC maintained a very low profile and did all they could to dampen the election mood. The consequences of their strategy can be seen in the election results. NC, which once had a large popular base, has been marginalised in most parts of the State and won only in those constituencies of Srinagar where, due to threat perception from militants, voter turnout was extremely low.

In most cases where there was high voter turnout, NC performed poorly while PDP won by huge margins. Most of NC victories were secured by negligibly tiny margins of 3 to 20 votes. The figures speak for themselves. In Srinagar, the only place where the NC did well, the party won 41 seats and polled a total of 33,000 votes, whereas PDP won 17 seats and polled 27,000 votes in the City. In the rest of the Valley, the NC has performed very poorly.



**A young woman candidate addressing her election meeting in village Balahama near Srinagar**

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The absence of democratic institutions to respond to the civic requirements and political aspirations of its citizens contributed to Kashmiri alienation from Indian democracy. The revival of municipal institutions, which devolve a measure of power to local communities after 27 long years marks a historic turn in the politics of this strife-torn state. The following table shows the substantial increase in people's participation after the October 2002 election:

### **Muftis' Strengths and Strategy**

In Punjab, terrorism was defeated by an "eye-for-an eye, bullet-for-a bullet" policy. This led to a great deal of human suffering and widespread anger against the many grave human rights violations. So also in the North East, the threat posed by secessionists is being dealt with mainly through strong military suppression with an inevitable increase in human rights abuses and enormous loss of life and suffering caused even to non-combatants.

In Kashmir, by contrast, it is the "Healing Touch" policy of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed that is weaning away people from violence, helping to usher in the beginnings of peace, and helping democratic culture reassert itself with noticeable vigour. This policy was initially received on all sides with a considerable degree of cynicism. Some saw it as an "appeasement" of Pakistan-supported terrorists; others dismissed it as a poll-time gimmick, while the secessionists dubbed Mufti an agent of the Central Government. Yet Mufti has proved the entire spectrum of critics wrong and delivered something close to a political miracle.

Even his opponents admit that ever since Mufti took charge as Chief

Minister, the political situation has witnessed steady improvement. The outrage, despair and sense of hopelessness that had become widespread among the people are slowly giving way to cautious optimism, a sense of hope and a new, though quiet, resolve to marginalise the politics of terror. What is it in his style of work that has contributed to this turn-around?

After a long time, people are seeing at least a politician lead by example. Even though the Chief Minister and his colleagues live under the shadow of death, they are making efforts to be accessible to citizens.



**Mufti addressing villagers on a make-shift platform**

Despite the handicap of a heavy security cover, Mufti meets hundreds of people on a daily basis, and attends to their grievances. He routinely makes appearances at small and large public functions. He chose to move his residence into the heart of Srinagar, opposite the main bazaar, despite contrary security advice. This conveyed a clear message that he did

not want personal safety at the cost of secluded isolation from his people.

Even for the municipal election, Mufti addressed numerous *mohalla*, bazaar and village meetings standing on dilapidated, makeshift platforms, addressing people with a mobile megaphone. He encouraged people to question and engage with him at close quarters. He also made unscheduled stops at many places where people wanted to communicate their grievances to him or hear his message of hope.

In each *mohalla* and village meeting the audience ranged from 500 to 3000. Many of these meetings were in localities considered strongholds of militants. Therefore, all those who attended them knew that militants who had threatened reprisals against all those who took part in elections were watching them. Several election meetings, including two I witnessed, were disrupted with grenade attacks. And yet, people continued to come and participate, even though fear was visible on their faces. The majority of candidates, including young girls barely past their teens, stood up to such threats and refused to withdraw from the election. The fact that the man who tops the hit list of terrorists and has survived several assassination attempts continues to make a major effort to respond to their problems is sending a powerful message without his having to say a word about the need to overcome fear of the gun. Consequently, increasing numbers of people are demonstrating their willingness to stand up to terrorist threats. This is in sharp contrast to the long rule of the National Conference when the Chief

Minister and his team lived in sanitised isolation, so that all links between the government and the people broke down, while citizens' outrage led them to lend support to terrorism since they felt there was no one to redress their grievances.

This is not to suggest that today all government agencies are functioning with efficiency and transparency. There is a 50 years old legacy of corruption and mismanagement which slows down the process of reform. But the leadership is seen to be making efforts to improve things. Even during the recent election campaign Mufti and his colleagues were met with a barrage of criticism regarding the poor quality of roads, drainage, water and power supply. Instead of turning defensive, he repeatedly emphasized that the vacuum created by the absence of elected representatives in municipalities had to be filled through the participation of the people in the election to the civic bodies, which had the power and the wherewithal to deliver these services and whereby people could exercise a measure of control over their local representatives and make them more responsive to the everyday concerns of citizens.

Throughout my visit, I did not once hear pro-Pakistan or anti-India slogans in any of the meetings I witnessed. This used to be standard fare in Kashmir before PDP assumed charge of the government. In this campaign there was very little slogan shouting. The mood was one of cautious evaluation. People came mainly to listen, rather than indulge in a show of strength. However, in a few meetings, I saw women and young girls greet Mufti sahib or his daughter Mehbooba with the slogan: "*Nakli shera chala gaya, asli shera aa gaya*" (The counterfeit lion has run away, the real lion has arrived). This was a clear hit at the National

Conference whose founder Sheikh Abdullah used to be referred to as *Sher-e-Kashmir* (the Lion of Kashmir). In most meetings, even PDP cadres did not indulge in noisy "*zindabad*" type slogan shouting which is typical of political meetings in India. Mufti's great achievement lies in his two pronged strategy. He has started to make progress on hard-core economic development issues while, at the same time, he has assured the people that their participation in municipal elections would not mean diluting his party's commitment to building a widespread consensus among all shades of political opinion to solve Kashmir's political problems.

### **An Unusual Politician**

A noteworthy feature of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's style of politics is that he studiously avoids attacking or ridiculing rival parties or politicians. He persists in this approach despite the fact that not only the main opposition party, the National Conference, but even his own coalition partners in the Congress do not spare any opportunity for attacking him, both for real and imagined shortfalls. The Hurriyat leaders are after his blood. Yet he rarely responds with a counter attack. Some of his colleagues, including daughter Mehbooba, are relatively more prone to rejoinders and verbal combat. But I have often observed Mufti tell them: "What is the purpose of such slanging matches? Learn to ignore such provocations." It is very difficult to engage Mufti in a negative conversation about anyone, including against those who are his bitter opponents, or those who would be glad to see him dead. I have often observed how people who bring him tales about how so-and-so is working against him are given short shrift. He often impatiently snaps back, saying: "*Phir kya hua? Theek hai, karne do na! Hum apna kaam karein.*" ("So

what? Let them do it! We should focus on our own work.")

Even though he campaigned to seek support for PDP candidates, in almost every election meeting I also heard him focus on asking people to come out in large numbers to vote, no matter which party or candidate they preferred. He was unhappy that the NC was not showing interest in building a lively campaign because he wanted to see a high voter turnout whether or not his party won the elections. Such an approach is unusual for politicians; most try to decimate their opponents once they are in power. This message has influenced the working style of many of his senior colleagues as well.

### **Consistent and Non Vindictive**

Mufti has by all accounts avoided the politics of vendetta. He spent 30 years as an opposition leader when the NC reigned supreme in the most autocratic fashion and defamed Mufti incessantly. The NC regime is popularly perceived as being hugely corrupt. Yet Mufti has avoided going on a revenge spree and refrained from ordering enquiries or taking action even in cases where there is strong evidence to prove corruption and siphoning of funds by the NC leaders – all because he thinks the positive agenda and constructive work he wishes to focus on will be derailed if he is seen as going after his political opponents.

However, his tendency to overlook the faults of others, including his cabinet colleagues and coalition partners, often gives outsiders the impression that he is soft on corruption. This impression lingers despite the fact that he himself has the reputation of being honest and is trying to hold the bureaucracy and ministerial colleagues to account. The popular perception is that he does not care about money. This did not



chang even after he became Chief Minister. People in the Valley say that for the first time in a long time, a Chief Minister is holding bureaucrats and ministers to account and monitoring their performance, insisting on deadlines being met while not resorting to harsh, authoritarian measures.

An important reason for the increasing credibility of Mufti in J&K is that he has not changed his approach after coming to power, as often happens with politicians. Nor does he tell each audience whatever he thinks they want to hear – a disease common among politicians in general, and Kashmiri politicians in particular. What he says in Srinagar is not different from his message in Jammu, or for that matter in Delhi or Bombay. Similarly, he has remained consistent in his stand that all sections of political opinion need to be involved in finding a permanent solution to the Kashmir problem, including those who are gunning for him. He is attempting to evolve a broad-based consensus to bring a peaceful settlement to the vexed Kashmir issue rather than eliminate all rival views because he knows from experience how the gun culture flourishes when democracy is muzzled and diverse views are not allowed legitimate space. By contrast, when NC was in power, if the Centre as much as tried to open channels of communication with the Hurriyat or any other political outfit, Farooq would throw political tantrums and whip up chauvinist sentiments to outdo the separatists. He would speak one language in Delhi, another in Srinagar and still another in Jammu.

When reporters or others asked Mufti for his response to the boycott call issued by the Hurriyat and openly *jehadi* outfits, Mufti defended their

democratic right to issue a boycott call – provided they stick to democratic means and do not enforce their agenda through threats of violence. He was thrilled that the mobilising support for a poll boycott because that showed they too had willy-nilly been forced to go and convince people rather than rely only on coercion and terror.

Similarly, when a group of Kashmiri Pandits had organised a protest demonstration outside his house, shouting “Mufti Mohammad *murdabad*, PDP *murdabad*” he said his reaction was one of delight to know that so many Hindus were still living in the Valley. They were protesting the fact that, while both the Centre and the State Government were doing their bit to help Hindus who had migrated from the Valley, no one was paying attention to those families who had stayed back whose children were not getting jobs. He immediately ordered that all able-bodied young people from Pandit families still in the Valley be provided employment in the police and other services as per their qualifications.

### **A Consensus Builder**

Mufti’s non-combative style and endeavour to work through consensus rather than confrontation is prone to be misunderstood by those who think frontal attacks on one’s opponents is proof of being more moral and righteous than everyone else. He is often accused of being “soft” on Pakistan-inspired terrorists, accused of making deals with them. For example, Omar Abdullah, the current president of NC and son of former Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah told me: “You will never see hard core Pakistan-bashing by PDP leaders, as we used to do. He only refers to ‘enemies of peace’, which can be interpreted differently by different people. Militants can say the security forces are ‘enemies of peace’, the Army and others of their inclination interpret it to mean

Pakistani terrorists.” This was Omar’s way of trying to convince me that PDP politics was wishy-washy, meant to please all and annoy none, unlike the clear-cut line he claims is taken by the NC.

However, facts tell a different story. NC leaders, starting from the Lion-of Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah, kept the people in a state of uncertainty and suspended animation ever since Kashmir acceded to India. Their intolerance for any kind of opposition and proclivity for rigging elections gave legitimacy to the Pakistan supported terrorist movement. Every time they had a conflict with the Centre, they revived their call for a plebiscite and tilted towards Pakistan. When they were allowed to hold unquestioned power, they indulged in hysterical Pakistan bashing. This slowly caused deep disenchantment among Kashmiris and gave people the feeling that leaders whom they had trusted would do anything to retain their *kursi* (seat of power). That is perhaps why, when certain secessionist leaders dug up the grave of the once venerated Sheikh Abdullah, there was no popular outrage.

During the NC regime, or at other times when Central rule was imposed in J&K, even peaceful demonstrations were not allowed without leaders being attacked and arrested by the police. JKLF and other separatist leaders spent long years in jail and consequently became popular heroes. PDP has released all major secessionist leaders, including those who are facing trials for serious offences. They are allowed out on bail and provided democratic space for peaceful protests. The result is that separatists and their *jehadi* brigades are not getting popular endorsement, as they once did.

Mufti’s commitment to build a consensus is all the more remarkable considering that the Central government keeps vacillating over

who they will allow to be involved in the negotiations. As Omar Abdullah put it: “Since the Vajpayee government saw in the PDP victory a vindication of their Kashmir policy and the PDP was insistent that the Hurriyat be engaged in dialogue, the Vajpayee government altogether ignored the NC. Now the Congress government at the Centre is doing the very opposite. They have brought us centre stage and marginalised the Hurriyat.”

### **Making Space for Opponents**

The Army is very impatient with the flip-flop policy of the NC and disdainful of Hurriyat’s role because almost all of them are popularly believed to be on the payroll of various intelligence agencies, including those of the Americans, Pakistanis and even the Indians. And yet, one has seen Mufti argue with conviction on every possible platform that each and every political opinion must be included in the process of evolving a consensual permanent solution to the Kashmir problem, rather than attempt to buy temporary peace through isolating any group which will make them do desperate things.

He never utters one word against Pakistan and keeps reiterating how peace and friendship between the two neighbours is the only viable option for India and Pakistan. Yet, the actual import of his politics has been to drastically curb the influence and appeal of Pakistani *jehadis*, whereas NC leaders, with their exaggerated anti-Pakistan rhetoric in phases when they wanted to cosy up to the Centre, end up with making Pakistan appear as the “liberator” of Kashmir in the eyes of many Kashmiri Muslims.

Those who accuse Mufti of having “made a deal” with militants tend to overlook the fact that, without weaning away Kashmiri youth from terrorist politics, there can be no lasting peace. That is why, from its very inception in 1999, PDP leaders began to build contacts with the



**Election meeting of Mehbooba Mufti: new role model for Kashmiri women**

families of militants as well as victims of terrorist violence by following a simple, compassionate approach. Whenever they got a report of reprisal killings by the Army, allegations of torture or abuse by security forces, or death or maiming from an attack by militants, Mehbooba Mufti and other leaders would personally visit such families, even in remote, dangerous villages, to offer their condolences and help. They took up cases of those implicated or targeted by the Army on false charges to get relief and seek corrective measures rather than shout slogans and make political capital out of each incident as other leaders were prone to do.

This is what marginalised the Hurriyat – people could see how the Hurriyat was encashing the misery of Kashmiri people for personal gain and amassing wealth by diverting enormous amounts of money contributed to the cause to their personal accounts, though it was collected for waging the “freedom struggle” of Kashmiris. By contrast, PDP leaders tried to bring some redress and helped in rebuilding broken lives, including those of surrendered militants or the shattered lives of families of dead terrorists.

PDP also succeeded in building a measure of credibility with the Army establishment, because they do not indulge in hysterical exaggeration. Therefore, the Army began responding to their interventions and reviewing their own acts of commission and omission. At the same time, victimised families felt that there was someone interested in their plight. Thus the “healing touch” policy was put in operation even before the PDP fought the elections and provided much-needed legitimacy to the 2002 polls. Two and a half years later, they are not facing an anti-incumbency reaction but instead are steadily gaining in popular appeal.

### **Politics of Compassion**

One of the first things Mufti did on becoming CM was to provide monetary support to numerous widows of slain militants as well as victims of terrorist violence. PDP has supported the education of hundreds of orphaned children. In most instances of allegations of high handed action by security forces, either the CM himself, or senior ministers or party leaders accompanied by area commanders of the army under whose jurisdiction any allegation of atrocity are made, visit the affected families within a short time afterward. Enquiries

are ordered and conducted with speed. There have been several instances of public apology by the army commanders in cases where a non-combatant got killed or harmed. In most cases, compensation cheques for those killed or maimed are delivered in their homes either by senior officials or ministers who go to condole the death so that the families do not have to face harassment in claiming the compensation money due to them.

It is through this compassionate route that Mufti has been able to win the trust of his people, including many families whose sons had taken up the gun. These families as well as fellow villagers have begun to pressure their sons to give up terrorism. Many have faulted PDP for being 'soft' on families of dreaded terrorists. But Mehbooba has a sound explanation: "Men who take to the gun do not take permission from their children or even their wives and old parents. Why should a whole family be punished for the acts of one man? Whatever the label on those who carry the gun, the end result is the same. Many of these children and elderly remain in shock; many are destitute. It is hard to know if the orphans of militants are worse off when their fathers are alive but absent from the home, living on the fringes of society as outlaws, or when their fathers are dead. No one lends a helping hand to them, no one shows any compassion." It is this courage to build a politics of compassion, not revenge, that has played a major role in reducing the appeal of the politics of violence.

### **Difficult Balancing Act**

Mufti has been able to perform another difficult balancing act. He is considered pro-Kashmir without being anti-Centre or anti-India. Any Chief Minister perceived as being close to the Centre is usually dubbed anti-Kashmiri. But Mufti has steadily built a non-confrontational relationship with the Centre, which has enabled him to take bold and unprecedented initiatives for peace, even while

strengthening his appeal as a man who can defend the legitimate interests of Kashmiris.

For example, after becoming Chief Minister, he was the first politician to have persisted with the demand even after coming to power that the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus route be opened up for two way traffic. This demand used to be raised only by politicians who wanted yet another stick to beat up the Indian government. Therefore, the demand was seen as subversive by the Delhi establishment, given that Pakistan trained terrorists come into India mainly through the J&K Line of Control. Allowing divided families of the two Kashmiris to meet was considered a highly risky proposition by the Indian establishment.

And yet, within a couple of years of coming to power, Mufti succeeded in putting the issue firmly on the agenda of Indo-Pak negotiations. He could convince Delhi that such an opening will further reduce the attraction for Pakistan among Pro-Pakistan Kashmiris, while people from across the border will see for themselves that the situation in Kashmir is not what the Pakistani media make it out to be. Just recently India even accepted a controversial requirement that Indian Kashmiris will not use Indian passports but identity papers issued by the J&K state government for cross border travel.

A few years ago such a concession would have been unthinkable. It would have created a storm of official and popular outrage in India. Today, even the Army generals have endorsed this peace initiative with enthusiasm and are working hard to make the road safe for cross border travel by April.

### **Army's Changing Role**

Infact, Mufti's clarion call – *Na grenade se, na goli se, baat banegi boli se* – ("Neither grenades nor bullets will solve our problems, only sustained dialogue can.") would not have gained popular respect if the military had not

begun changing their methods of combating insurgency. Anyone who talked to the Army generals or even low and middle-ranking officers before the 2002 elections, which brought PDP's "Healing Touch" policy to the fore, could not help but notice their growing sense of anger and resentment at the fact that the Army had been called in to do a dirty job of dealing with the mess created by politicians. Therefore, even when they did not express political opinions openly, one could sense their disdain for the political establishment. Today, one senses a different mood. A significant section of the Army's top leadership have come to see the advantage of the "Healing Touch" approach and proudly talk of their constructive engagement with the Kashmiri people, an approach that takes them far beyond the ordinary call of duty as soldiers.

Not just in the Valley, but most Kashmiri Muslims even in Delhi will tell you that one significant achievement of the PDP led government is that people do not feel quite as terrorized by the security forces as they once did. For the first time the Army is responding to complaints of abuses with prompt action, summary trials and court-martials against offenders. Officers are being dismissed from service and some even imprisoned in cases where allegations of abuses, including rape, have been proven to be true. People are no longer "disappearing" in large numbers after being picked up on suspicion by the Army.

### **Beginnings of Redressal**

General Patankar, who retired last year as General Officer in Command of the region and former Army Chief Vij are widely credited with starting the process of making officers and soldiers act with greater professionalism, respecting the rights and protecting the well being of citizens. For example, when Pir Abdul Qayyum Shah of

Darwah Wagoora in Baramula district was gunned down on the night of June 15, 2003, a quick enquiry by the Army revealed that he was wrongly targeted. Finance Minister Muzaffar Hussain Beig promptly visited the village along with General Patankar who publicly apologised to the family. In addition, Shah's son was given a government job and there was prompt monetary compensation provided to the family.

Similarly, a young man named Tahir Hussain Mukhoomi was picked up a day after his wedding on September 12, 2003 by the 22 Rashtriya Rifles on suspicion of harbouring terrorists in Sopore. On September 15, he was found dead. This was just before the PDP government came to power. Within a few weeks, the enquiry was completed and once again General Patankar accompanied the Chief Minister and Mehbooba Mufti to the victim's village. He is reported to have touched the feet of the dead man's father to openly express regret over the death. He embraced the victim's younger siblings and assured the father of the dead man that the Army would extend all help in rehabilitating the family. The compensation cheque was personally delivered by the CM who also got involved personally in helping the family rebuild their lives.

A few further examples: Captain Tewatia of 12 Rashtriya Rifles, operating in Banihal, was found guilty of rape committed in village Nougam. He was promptly tried and sentenced to seven years of rigorous imprisonment. Lance Naik R K Yadav of 13 Rashtriya Rifles was found guilty of sexual molestation on August 23, 2003. He too was promptly tried and dismissed from service. Havildar Krishan Bahadur was found guilty of misconduct with one Hakim Jan on December 20, 2004. He was not only dismissed but also sentenced to one-year rigorous imprisonment and handed over to

the civil police within seven days of the incident on December 27, 2004.

Another soldier – Rifleman Zuber Khan - was also court martialed and dismissed from service because he was present outside the house when Krishan Bahadur misbehaved with the woman, but had failed to report this violation of the Army's code of conduct. In the most recent case, Major Rehman Hussain of 30 Rashtriya Rifles was accused of rape and sexual molestation of three women at village Badra Payeen, near Handwara, on November 6. The alleged victims included a teenage girl. A General Court Martial was ordered which started proceedings within 13 days. The DNA test showed that the 60-year-old woman had not been raped. The girl had been sexually molested, but not raped. The Major was dismissed from the army and given a year's prison term by the end of January.

General Sharma who took charge as G.O.C. after General Patankar is perceived as carrying forward the same tradition. He says his aim is to instil a sense of security among the populace and earn their goodwill. His slogan : *Jawan aur aawam, aman hai mukam* (When the army makes common cause with the people, there is enduring peace). I witnessed a two hour long multimedia presentation by senior army officers describing the numerous constructive initiatives by the Army, including running a large number of Goodwill Schools and health centres in Kashmir villages, including those difficult to reach. The Army claims to have also started numerous programmes for youth, including employment schemes, and undertaken major rural development projects. However, I am withholding writing about all that till such time as I have had a chance to personally witness the workings of such institutions and projects and evaluate their impact on Kashmiri society.

All this is not to suggest that every complaint of rights violation gets such a prompt and certain redressal. There are enough officers who continue with the old mindset and believe that since they are fighting a proxy war with an enemy that observes no moral restraints, they too should be free to use methods they create awe and fear.

However with the new Army Chief General JJ Singh himself promising and reiterating in forceful terms that he will not allow "collateral damage" by the soldiers while they carry out anti insurgency operations, things are likely to improve further.

One hopes that we will witness similar improvements in the behaviour and attitude of other security and paramilitary forces such as the Border Security Force, which is far more notorious, brutal and unaccountable for their actions in their dealings with the people. They do not seem to have put in comparable effort in improving their performance.

### To Sum Up

It is a welcome sign that both the politicians as well as the Army are engaged in redefining their role vis-à-vis the Kashmiri people and consequently getting more cooperation from people in combating terrorism.

It is as vital to understand the processes that heal political wounds, the strategies that help restore people's faith in the political system and make them feel that they have a stake in defending it, as it is to understand what causes alienation and destroy people's faith in democratic values and motivates them to take to violence.

Democracies need daily nurturing. Societies that fail to celebrate defenders of democracy and instead get obsessed with terrorist violence to the exclusion of important trends for reconciliation, that focus their attention mainly on film stars, celebrities in sports and fashion to the neglect of serious political commentary,, end up being ruled by thugs and power maniacs. □