

# Bridging Divides and Healing Hurts

## Need to Nurture the Peace Process in Kashmir

○ Madhu Purnima Kishwar

*The offer of the Indian Government to carry out relief operations for earthquake victims across the LOC, jointly with Pakistan government indicates the new confidence we have acquired in dealing with the Kashmir issue. By using this natural calamity to reach out to the people of “Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK)”, the Indian Government has expanded the scope of the “Healing Touch Policy” across the once hostile border.*

*For decades India fought a defensive battle vis a vis Pakistan on the legitimacy of Kashmir’s accession to India and we acted as though we had a lot to hide. Foreign journalists were not allowed to visit Kashmir. Pakistanis found it difficult to get visas even to meet sick and dying relatives. The idea of soft borders seemed inconceivable.*

*However, all that started changing after the October 2002 elections, which were acknowledged by the world community to be free and fair. Since then the State has witnessed a new resurgence of democracy with a growing constituency for peaceful settlement of the Kashmir issue after 15 long years of bloody conflict. This is a major factor for the new confidence displayed by our Government in dealing with Pakistan.*

**H**itherto all our J&K chief ministers used to be derided by the Pakistani leaders as puppets and stooges of the Delhi *durbar*. They projected only pro-Pakistan secessionist outfits as the “true representatives” of Kashmiri opinion. For the first time in decades, the Pakistani establishment has had to acknowledge the legitimacy of the elected government of J&K by inviting Mufti and PDP chairperson Mehbooba Mufti to Islamabad, thus tacitly recognising that PDP has been successful in representing the aspirations of a large spectrum of people of J&K. All this has given India an unprecedented advantage in dealing with Pakistan as well as the international community in its attempts to bring about an enduring settlement of the Kashmir issue. The Centre could never have launched its peace offensive with Pakistan, if the internal situation in the State had remained explosive.

### Continuing Information Gap

Even though the issue of Kashmir stirs deep passions among the educated people of India, very few bother to keep themselves informed



**Mufti Mohammad Syed**

about important changes taking place and new forces being at work in the sensitive border state. For example, many people in India think Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed’s “Healing Touch Policy” in Kashmir of winning over estranged Kashmiri Muslims through more humane and democratic methods, rather than adopting “an eye for an eye” policy in combating terrorism, is evidence of his softness towards *jehadi* militants.

I realised the gravity of this misperception when I began receiving tonnes of angry and upset responses to my article: “Democracy as the Best Antidote to Terrorism: Mufti’s Healing Touch Policy Proves Efficacy in Kashmir” after it was posted on the *Sulekha* website subsequent to its

publication in MANUSHI No. 146 of 2005. Doubts about the “Healing Touch Policy” persist because most people are not aware that the “Healing Touch Policy” has also meant reducing corruption, providing responsive governance, fostering a process of reconciliation across political, ethnic and regional divides, as well as revitalising the economy of the Valley by reviving tourism and investments. By foregrounding the politics of development and empowerment of citizens through devolution of powers, Mufti has built a significant and growing constituency for peace and democracy. Kashmir’s example shows that the battle for peace, justice and secular polity can be won only when combined with good governance.

Yet people in the rest of India are made to take notice of Kashmir by the media only when bombs explode or there is a grenade attack by *fidayeen* or a natural disaster, such as the recent earthquake. It is understandable 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, indulge in negative reporting that generates fear, communal mistrust and hostility. However, when the same sorts of bias are reflected in the national newspapers and TV, it makes one wonder why the media focus mainly on negative reporting from Kashmir, which keeps alive the stereotype of all Kashmiri Muslims as rabid *jehadis*. The fate of secularism in India is intimately tied up with how effectively this image is rectified by an objective description of the efforts and risks people are taking in endorsing Mufti's call: *Na bandook se na goli se, baat banegi boli se.*" (Our problems will be solved neither through guns nor bullets, but through sustained dialogue.)

### Obsession with Bad News

The continuing misperception about Kashmir is in part due to the way news reporters are influenced by the international media fashions that privilege violence and disasters, along with erotica. Too many in this industry have sadly come to believe that these types of reports are the only ones capable of capturing the attention of their audiences for a precious moment or two on the day's headlines and the television screens. Moreover, most of India's reporters are not provided with adequate resources to undertake the difficult, time-consuming work required to get a sense of more significant trends. Therefore, they tend to resort to sensational journalism to grab the attention of audiences.

This obsession with bad news is evident even in the coverage of natural disasters. For example, when Kashmir witnessed unprecedented snowstorms last winter resulting in the burial of several villages under mounds of snow, leading breakdown of communications and road links to parts of the State, all we saw and heard in the media were stories of death, destruction and dislocation. These were quite real and required due attention. However, far less attention was paid to the speed with



Children and adults at a newly opened amusement park in Pahalgam

which the State government worked together with the Army in rescuing people and repairing the roads, bridges and communication channels. What is more, the positive aspects of this heavy snowfall were altogether ignored. To the best of my knowledge, only *The Indian Express* published a report on how this heavy

snowfall over the area was good news for India's drying rivers and had saved Kashmir from yet another year of water crisis and crop failure by replenishing ground water resources after four consecutive years of drought.

To give a concrete example of the biased reporting, any number of



School children enjoying an outing

papers and TV channels criticised the decision of the Government of J&K in releasing the compensation amount of rupees one lakh to victims of the recent earthquake in instalments – portraying it as an insensitive and devious decision. However, the logic used by the Government was as follows: at a time when people have lost their homes and are living in tents without any privacy, they have no safe places to keep big amounts of money. With

terrorist gunmen lurking all around, if so much money is put in their hands in one go, they risk losing the money through threats or actual violence. Even the BSF or police *jawans* might be tempted to snatch the money.

To minimise that risk, the Government released Rs.40,000 as the first instalment and let it be known that people could withdraw Rs.5000 per day from the bank from the balance due to them. Since, no one is likely to spend rupees one lakh in one day, the money is being released in steady doses to provide safety to the recipients. This is a sign of consideration but it has been projected as an indicator of callousness.

### Missing Positive Signals

The propensity for lopsided reporting and chasing mainly bad news because it provides sensational fare, is resulting in the media missing out on significant new developments and trends, as the following examples illustrate. Most news purveyors would easily recall how a day before the launch of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus, there was a terrorist attack at the Tourist Reception Centre where the 50 odd passengers, who were to travel on the historic bus, had been housed. The attacked



**The Tourist Reception Centre in flames**

building (barely a furlong or two away from the current residence of the Chief Minister, who chooses to stay in the city centre rather than in sanitised isolation) went up in flames. All of our T.V. channels, which had come to J&K to provide live coverage of the bus launch, stayed focused on the raging fire that engulfed the Reception Centre and kept relaying emotionally charged, incorrect reports about the likelihood of cancellation of the inaugural bus service to Muzaffarabad, given the threats of further *fidayeen* attacks.

I happened to be in Srinagar that afternoon. When I heard the news on T.V. in my hotel room, I took a taxi and rushed to the site of the attack. I was

amazed to find that the entire city was functioning normally. Traffic continued to move on the main road – barely 200 yards away from the Reception Centre – as though nothing significant had happened. Even children continued with their game of cricket in the nearby *maidan* though they could clearly see the flames and smoke. The only hysterical and nervous sounding voices one heard were those of T.V. anchors who kept repeating in

visibly charged tones that this could well be the end of the peace process with Pakistan.

A group of young men (about a hundred) who had quite clearly been positioned at the site by those behind the blasts to trash the idea of the peace process, were the only people projected on T.V. news as representatives of Kashmiri opinion. The thousands who calmly went about their business were paid no attention. I pleaded with some of the T.V. anchors I personally knew to add glimpses of how ordinary Kashmiris were delivering a huge snub to the militants by remaining unperturbed in the face of this provocation. No one heeded my request. Consequently

people in the rest of India and the world only saw the rising flames, and heard non-stop emotionally charged panic stricken commentaries of T.V. anchors for hours on end about the terrorist attacks as well as speculation about the passengers backing out from the journey amidst threats from *jehadis*. This coverage thus communicated a one-sided and misleading image of the popular mood in Kashmir.

Similarly, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Srinagar last year, our TV channels focused obsessively on the gunfire between the security



**Thousands had gathered to celebrate the inaugural Sringar Muzaffrabad bus service**



forces and a group of terrorists who had positioned themselves a short distance from the venue chosen for the Prime Minister's public meeting. One of the TV channels, on its own initiative, wrongly 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 emphasized that more than 20,000 people stayed to listen to Manmohan Singh, despite guns booming all around and frightening images being relayed non-stop on TV. Several thousand more, who were delayed while coming from long distances, kept pouring 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 gathered in such large numbers, nor asked them to explain what motivated them to come at such risk and stay back, despite the bouts of gunfire, 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 a safer location. Mufti was actually in Patna at that time. His family stayed in the house throughout the attack without panicking. Mufti says that when he returned from Patna later that day he was amused to find out how normal the town, including his own neighbourhood, looked. He saw children playing cricket in a neighbouring field. All the shops in the city, including those in the vicinity of the CM's residence, were open. But the TV channels only gave images that indicated an ongoing attack and relayed pictures of hordes of security men outside the CM's residence. Therefore, he asked that the security contingents be reduced to the essential minimum and only the little



**Such relaxed outings were inconceivable just a few years ago**

area where the incident had taken place be cordoned off. He wanted the neighbouring streets to continue functioning normally so that the media would not get the chance to project the image of a whole city under siege.

Similarly, when a public meeting of Mufti or his daughter Mehbooba or some other leader is attacked with grenades, the main message people get from media reports is one of continual unremitting siege by *jehadi* violence. We are seldom told how, most often, after such assaults, within a short time, people reassemble to hear their leaders address the rally, which speaks volumes for the endorsement given by Kashmiri people to the peace process.

This calm and measured way of responding to *jehadi* violence is typical of Mufti's style including when he himself is the target. This sends a powerful message to the citizens that the best way to undermine *jehadi* politics is to avoid panic and remain unfazed. And yet, the media has a way of remaining riveted on the blood and gore part, thus missing out on significant new developments.

### **Indicators of Change**

For example, Similarly people in India heard nothing about a cultural event of great significance when this year in August, the Srinagar Kendra of Doordarshan organised a weeklong theatre festival, which provided opportunity to local theatre groups to revive themselves. Islamic militancy had snuffed out cultural life in the State during the last 13 years. This event would have been noticed by our national media only if some bombs had exploded in or near the auditorium, with the entire focus being placed on death and destruction rather than on the deep significance of this endeavour and its success with the public.

The huge auditorium at Tagore Hall was packed beyond capacity on each day of the festival. A large number of women took part in the plays despite the initial fears that the directors may not find enough girls and women to play female roles because terrorists are trying hard to make Kashmiri women accept the culture of burka and seclusion. There was a play on the staging of *Ram Leela*. Another one, *Gash-E-Tarukh*, upheld the ideal of Gandhi's *ahimsa*.

*Zallur* – a murder mystery - depicted the deep bond of love and caring between a Kashmiri Pandit woman and a Muslim man who treats her as his sister. *Zamaney Pok Ne Humdum* dealt with the loss experienced by both Hindus and Muslims after the forced migration of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley. *Brunz Brunz Qayamat* depicted the plight of people who have lost the ability to enjoy life because they are constantly living under the shadow of terror.

In short, all the plays reaffirmed humane, secular values and took a stand against the politics of violence and religious extremism – either explicitly or implicitly. The positive emotional response of the audience was palpable. No less significant is the fact that the entire initiative for catalysing this cultural resurgence came from a woman named Shehzadi Simon. When she became the first woman to be posted as Director of Srinagar Doordarshan Kendra in 2004, too many people thought she belonged to the wrong gender, especially considering the then political atmosphere of the State. However, she has proved sceptics wrong by initiating many new projects, including the first ever film festival organised in Kashmir. These activities are promoting meaningful interaction between different regions of the State and providing the much-needed emotional and cultural expression to peoples' tribulations and their quest for peace. More than her effort, it is the enthusiastic response evoked by her endeavours that indicates the profound change of mindset in Kashmiri youth.

Not too long ago, only officials and armed forces would attend flag hoisting on Republic Day while we would see Kashmiris burning the Indian flag on such occasions to express their sense of estrangement from the Indian political system. Pakistan-supported *jehadis* were able to convince many Kashmiris that any



**Ramlila in Srinagar**

association with India was a betrayal of the Kashmiri cause. Within months of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) coming to power, the Independence Day celebrations of 2003 witnessed the participation of 15 to 20 thousand people in Srinagar alone. After a 15-year hiatus, school children, including teenage girls, sang and danced on the occasion, defying the writ of the terrorists.

During the 1990s even politicians from mainstream pro-Indian parties

did not dare be publicly associated with such symbolic gestures of allegiance to the Indian Union. After the 2002 elections, Republic Day ceremonies have been presided over by senior ministers in every district headquarter of the Valley with attendance ranging from about two to six thousand at each centre. However, while burning the Indian flag in any corner of Kashmir becomes headline news, thousands of people, including children all over



**Scene from play *Zallur* - depicting deep affection between a Kashmiri Muslim man and his adopted sister, a Kashmiri Pandit married woman**

Kashmir, joining Republic Day or Independence Day celebrations does not attract comparable attention, even when it means people risking their lives by such participation in open defiance of *jehadis*.

During the previous regime, there used to be endless *hartals* and *bandhs* against human rights abuses by security forces and the callous attitude of the then government in dealing with people's grievances. The number of *bandhs* or *hartals* on those kinds of issues has gone down dramatically. Now people come out to protest demanding civic amenities and development work rather than secession, pointing to the foregrounding of a development agenda. The voter-participation in various elections is going up steadily. In several constituencies, 70-80 per cent of the electorate voted in the municipal elections of May 2004.

The strong urge to come out of the depression and caused by long years of brutality, death and destruction, is evident in many small and big ways. One of the common demand one hears from young people these days in the Valley is that cricket and play grounds be provided in their area. One of the most heart-warming sights I saw in the Valley was the huge crowd of children and young people at the newly opened amusement park in Pahalgam.

### Curbing Rights Abuses

This is mainly because human rights abuses by security forces have been brought under check. This is not to suggest that human rights abuses have vanished from the scene but merely to indicate that the Government is more responsive to these issues. In many instances, lapses have been acknowledged and amends made expeditiously, including some face to face apologies by army commanders and prompt payment of compensation money, mostly hand-delivered to the victim's family by a senior member of



**Shahzadi Simon**

the Government. For example, whenever there is an allegation of human rights abuses, senior PDP leaders expeditiously investigate the validity or otherwise of those charges. If they conclude that the allegations are genuine, in most cases they have worked to ensure that speedy redressal is provided. Thus, vested interests are less able to use such incidents to build up anti-India hysteria and damage the credibility of the armed forces without justification.

For example, when investigations revealed that four young daily labourers of Doda were picked up by the Army from Jammu and murdered in cold-blood in Kupwara, the government allowed the J&K police to register cases against the army personnel involved in the alleged murders. Consequently, the army also had to conduct its own enquiry and order DNA tests to establish the veracity of allegations. Not surprisingly, many in the Army are unhappy at Mufti's standing up to them on human rights abuses by the Army.

Similarly, when there was a proposal from the Army that an Emergency be declared in the State and the responsibility for earthquake relief should be handed over completely to the Army, Mufti stood his ground and insisted that the civil administration and the Army should work together rather than be seen as inimical to each other.

During the earlier regime, even a peaceful protest used to be dealt with by arrests, beatings and repression. Opposition leaders were constantly in and out of jail. That made them



**Groups of schoolgirls and Kashmiris from other towns enjoying a weekend outing in Pahalgam**



appear as great martyrs and legitimised their status as symbols of Kashmiri assertion even though they pursued destructive politics. Today, except for those still involved in heinous crimes, leaders of all hues, including secessionists, are out of jail and allowed free space to express their opposition to the Government through democratic means. The result is there for all to see: secessionist forces are losing their appeal and getting steadily marginalised.

Instead of treating the fight against terrorism as the Government's sole responsibility, Mufti is enabling people to become active agents in this battle, thus creating a widespread constituency working for peace. Since the population at large is not feeling as alienated as they did before, the Army is able to focus more on constructive activities such as running Sadbhavna schools, taking health care to remote villages through mobile clinics, undertaking hydroelectric projects and assisting in general development work. This is helping change the image of the armed forces from that of an army of occupation to that of a protection force for citizens. However, there is a section within the Army establishment, which is unhappy at the fact that they do not any more enjoy uncontrolled power, as they did when Kashmir was under direct Army rule or when an incompetent Farooq Abdullah was Chief Minister.

Contrast the success of Mufti's methods with the Andhra government's ineffective and messy handling of the Naxalite challenge, and you realise the importance of sagacious leadership in running a democracy.

### **Bridging Religious Divides**

This improvement has also made it possible to initiate measures that will facilitate the return of Kashmiri Pandits to the Valley. Even though the numbers of Kashmiri Hindus



**A Kashmiri family enjoying river rafting**

returning to the Valley may not yet be impressive, the processes and means being used for reconciliation deserve attention. As someone who has kept a watch on the developments in Kashmir, I witnessed the start of this process from November 2002 onwards. It all began with Mufti specially flying down to Delhi to host a dinner for Kashmiri Pandits on the occasion of Shivratri—an important festival for Hindus, especially those from Kashmir, who are mostly Shaivites. He made a fervent plea to them to return to their homeland, saying Kashmir was incomplete without them. Many Pandits treated this appeal with cynicism, and some even openly derided it then and continue to do so till now, alleging nothing has changed to merit the return of Pandits to the Valley. True, many still languish in the relief camps in Jammu, and many others do not wish to return thinking the peace process is too fragile to be trusted. In my view, this is a shortsighted view of the dynamic political situation in the Valley.

Mufti's way of establishing his secular credentials and reasserting the spirit of Kashmiriyat is to avoid

rhetorical confrontations with religious extremists and instead let his positive and constructive actions do the talking, as the following example will illustrate. In December 2002, he had invited a small group of journalists and a large contingent of tour operators from various parts of India to come and celebrate Christmas at Gurmarg. On the morning of December 25<sup>th</sup> he announced at breakfast that he was going to take the visitors to an old abandoned Church about a kilometre away from the hotel where they were staying. The fact that a man at the top of the terrorist hit list was walking fearlessly to visit an abandoned church at the head of the group amidst high mounds of snow, and stayed in the same hotel as all other guests, rather than remaining confined to a special government guesthouse sanitised through heavy security, had a visible impact on the visitors.

People also took note of the fact that a priest had been specially brought in from Srinagar for a prayer ceremony to be held that morning to celebrate the re-opening of the Church. Soon after the prayer

meeting, Mufti announced that the State Government would renovate the historic building. And the promise was honoured without delay. It is noteworthy that there is no big vote bank of Christians either in Gulmarg or in the Valley whom he wanted to win over. Moreover, this gesture was made despite the fact that Islamic militants in Kashmir had started targeting Christian priests for allegedly seeking converts. Without entering into a rhetorical argument with Islamic *jehadis*, Mufti nevertheless gave a clear signal by his symbolic support of the minuscule Christian minority within J&K that the Government stood for pluralism and respectful coexistence among people of diverse faiths.

Another significant event was the decision of the State Government to organise a major tourism campaign on the Hindu festival of *Lohdi*, which marks the end of winter, to be celebrated at a hill resort named Patni Top in the Jammu region. For the first time people all over India could see families of tourists and honeymooning couples enjoying the snow-clad mountains of this hitherto neglected and relatively unknown hill resort. Similarly, the State Government began celebrating *Vasant Panchami* – another Hindu festival that marks the coming of spring.

This sent a message not only to Hindus across India that J&K was not an “Islamic state” despite its Muslim majority but also to the people of Jammu who had till recently felt marginalised and neglected by the ruling regimes in Srinagar. By promoting Patni Top of Jammu as a choice tourist destination to rival Gulmarg and Pahalgam, Mufti reached out to the people of Jammu with the message that the economic growth and development of that region is no less important for his government than that of the Valley. Since Jammu has for long resented the disproportionate dominance of the Valley in the politics of J& K, giving due attention to

Jammu’s development provides another dimension of Mufti’s “healing touch” Policy.

The State Government’s active involvement in making arrangements for Kashmiri Pandits to celebrate Jyeshtha Ashtami at the ancient and highly revered Khir Bhawani temple near Gandarbal also sends a signal that Kashmir belongs to all Kashmiris irrespective of their faith. According to Sushila Bhan, a well-known educationist of Kashmiri origin, the participation of Kashmiri Pandits in this sacred festival has risen dramatically in the last three years, with busloads of Pandits coming from all over India for this pilgrimage.

Not surprisingly, partly as a result of these and other equally courageous symbolic incidents, Kashmir started witnessing a big revival of domestic tourism from 2003 onwards. The vast majority of these visitors are Hindu. Tourism is not just an industry for Kashmir, as it is for Bangkok. It provides a vital emotional link between the people of Kashmir and the rest of India. To get tourists to start visiting again when a large number of Kashmiris themselves had abandoned the Valley and migrated to safer places like Delhi and Bangalore is no small achievement. This is especially credible because the media images of Kashmir are still dominated by bomb blasts and grenade attacks. The fact that 10 lakh tourists, including young honeymooning couples, visited J&K this year is in itself proof that people all over India are getting the message that his “healing touch” includes repairing the strained bonds between Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus all over India.

Mufti is very creative in conceiving new ideas for bridge-building that appeal to everyone’s enlightened self-interest. For example, during his recent visit to Kargil along with Deputy CM

Mangat Ram, while traversing the area where a little-known pool of water called Draupadi Kund is situated, he proposed that it be developed as both a pilgrim centre and a tourist attraction for the region. As per the legend associated with this Kund, Draupadi, the tragic heroine of the Mahabharat, had her last bath here before she died forlorn in the Himalayas.

Kargil is a Muslim majority region of J&K. Celebrating sacred sites connected with Hindu mythology encourages the flow of Hindu pilgrims to the area, thereby promoting greater interaction between Muslims of that isolated region with Hindus from rest of India. In this way a vital economic and cultural link would be forged between the two. While travelling with them, I was struck by the fact that this and several other such proposals came from Mufti, a Muslim battling the wrath of *jehadi* Muslims, rather than from Mangat Ram, who is expected to represent and be sensitive to Hindu interests.

Similarly, he assured the Buddhist minority of Kargil that he would take up their demand for opening of the Kargil-Skardu route to enable them to visit the Buddhist sacred sites, such as Taxila, located in Pakistan. This adds another constituency to encourage the Indo-Pak peace process.

Consequently, small numbers of Kashmiri Hindus have quietly started returning to Kashmir in response to the efforts of the State Government to offer them help in returning to their homes. Two special housing complexes have been built for Kashmiri Pandits – one in Budgam and another one near Mattan for those Kashmiri Pandits who want to return to Kashmir but stay amidst fellow Hindus. Several hundred houses have already been built and many more are under construction. Fifteen



hundred people are supposed to have applied for allotment of these houses.

Those who lost their businesses are being helped with loans and subsidies to restart their enterprises. These efforts have not been as vigorous as Kashmiri Pandits would like to see happen but given the little time he has had to calm the raging fires, their importance should not be underestimated, considering that the previous regime did not even raise the issue, leave alone try to solve it.

### Restoring Broken Links

Mufti is carefully nurturing stronger economic and cultural ties with the rest of India by following policies, which also appeal to the self-interest of Kashmiris. The work on the railway line connecting Udhampur to Baramula has been carried out with great momentum despite obvious risks. Land for this railway line has been acquired and compensation given to farmers in record time without protests and resistance as routinely happens in other parts of India. In order to invite investments in the IT sector, a Technology Park has been created in Srinagar with prime land offered for this industry at nominal prices in addition to a 15-year tax holiday. This is a very bold step considering Kashmiris are very touchy about their land slipping out into the hands of non-Kashmiris - so much so that they have been pushing for a law which prevents a daughter from inheriting family land and immovable property, if she marries a non-Kashmiri. Yet, Mufti has been able to give land at concessional prices for new industries, like the Amul milk processing plant, set up in 2004, without inviting any backlash



**No longer defensive : Foreign Minister Natwar Singh with Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz**

because he is perceived as someone honestly trying hard to revive the Kashmiri economy and create jobs for the unemployed youth of the State.

This process of revival and reconciliation needs to be understood and documented because the valuable insights one gets from the conflict resolution strategies being adopted successfully in Kashmir may be useful for other troubled regions such as Manipur and Nagaland. However, none of these gestures at ethnic reconciliation and redressing regional imbalances would have a chance of success if Mufti were not widely perceived as someone whose personal integrity is unassailable - someone who is making an honest attempt, against heavy odds, to provide honest and responsive governance after decades of mismanagement, corruption and callous disregard of the people's well-being.

### Combating Corruption

There are not many chief ministers in India who can claim that the State Government has provided 50,000 new jobs through a fair process based on merit, as does Mufti. These include recruitment in the police, schoolteachers and engineers. In a country where government jobs –

including those of peons, postmen, state civil servants and police - are openly auctioned, this in itself is a creditable achievement.

Even though the Right to Information Act passed by the Central Government does not apply to J&K, Mufti swiftly passed a Right to Information Act for J&K. This is not to suggest that corruption is under effective check but the message from the top

is unambiguous and the personal conduct of the Chief Minister is widely perceived to be above board. Given how corruption has become deeply entrenched it will take time for people to get organised to combat it with force. Mufti may have set new trends by personal example, but some of his colleagues and allies are certainly not traversing the same path. This is evident from the recent expose in *The Indian Express* of September 29, 2005 that the Speaker of the State Assembly who happens to be from the Congress Party carried out a hurriedly conducted recruitment, whereby most of the 54 new job appointments he sanctioned have been doled out to relatives of politicians and officials of the Secretariat. This has evoked visible indignation. By contrast, we did not witness any protests alleging nepotism in the recruitment of 50,000 candidates that were under Mufti's charge because most people were convinced that he did not try to influence any of those appointments. Similarly, reports of earthquake relief revealed stories of how certain Congress ministers had cornered all the relief materials in their own homes distributing it selectively as political crumbs and siphoning off the rest. An official who resisted was

punished with a transfer. (See *The Indian Express*, October 15, 2005).

Mufti admits that he consciously decided to lead by example rather than start punishing or dismissing those who indulge in corrupt practices. His reasoning: "I wanted to stay focused on the big picture and aimed at generating a democratic resurgence rather than get bogged down by internal conflicts within the alliance. Had I taken action against some of my colleagues, our entire energy would have been consumed by attacks and counter attacks." This may appear as being soft on corruption but the enactment of the Right to Information Act indicates that his strategy is to enable people to become active watchdogs rather than centre the anti corruption movement around his own person and chief ministerial action.

While the ordinary Kashmiri has welcomed Mufti's anti-corruption moves, many among the PDP cadres and his ministerial colleagues are disgruntled because Mufti does not dole out patronage by way of government jobs or contracts to his party men or to *sifarshi* candidates, as has been the established practice not just in Kashmir but in other states as well. By contrast, the National Conference had cultivated a vast network of committed cadres in J&K by its *sifarshi* appointments. Not all Mufti's party men are happy at being told: "My priority is not PDP, my priority is the rapid development of the State. That can not happen if corruption and nepotism is not checked. I may not have given you jobs. But we have given you the opportunity to face the people with your head held high over the fact that the Party is delivering on its promises."

### **Delinking Religion & Politics**

In the Muslim dominated regions of J&K it has become a common feature for politicians of all hues to try and establish their

*mazhabi* credentials by starting their political meetings with Islamic invocations or prayers. This has probably been adopted as a part of the many attempts to placate Islamic militants. It has also become a common practice for political leaders, not just of the *jehadi* variety, to hold their public meetings near major mosques to coincide with the end of Friday prayers so that they have a ready-made audience. PDP cadres told me Mufti discourages them from using such tactics to attract audiences and never does it himself.

I have attended more than two-dozen public meetings addressed by Mufti. Not once did he start off his speech with religious prayers, though many of the local leaders hosting the event did so. However, it was interesting to see him invoke the name of Allah to promote secular causes that strengthen values of equality, gender justice and corruption-free governance. For example, he repeatedly dwelt on the urgency of promoting girl's education by telling the audiences at public meetings: "It is the *hukum* of God that no one be denied education. Therefore, it is your sacred duty to educate your daughters." In addition, he would remind politicians and government officials that Allah does not forgive those who indulge in corruption. Other than in these two contexts I did never hear him introduce religious overtones or symbolism, even when addressing meetings in areas where Islamic fervour is palpable.

Corrupt, authoritarian and incompetent rulers often resort to divisive politics, pitching one community against the other, promoting a siege mentality among citizens in their desperate search for a captive vote bank or sectional endorsement to keep themselves in power. Mufti does not need to adopt this strategy because he has chosen

to make responsive governance his point of appeal.

### **The Congress Response**

Unfortunately, a section of Congressmen feel deeply perturbed and unhappy at the growing credibility of the PDP. They believe this will reduce their party to playing second fiddle forever, as they are forced to do in Bihar with regard to RJD. They overlook the fact that the fortunes of the Congress Party have improved enormously after it entered into an alliance with the PDP as was evident even in the municipal election results. By forging a new democratic agenda for J&K, Mufti has also generated an increase in goodwill for his alliance partner.

They would also do well to remember that the coalition arrangements of the Congress with most of its allies are under severe strain, both at the Centre as well as in most states. Laloo Prasad Yadav is a loyal ally at the Centre, but his incompetent and corrupt government in Bihar, as well as his understandable opposition to the Congress re-establishing roots in Bihar, damages the Congress Party's stability and credibility. Ram Vilas Paswan has also proved to be a difficult and unreliable ally. The communist parties spare no opportunity to put down the Congress Party and use their leverage to keep vital decisions in limbo while making no secret of their preference for a Third Front. The NCP is busy cutting the roots of the Congress Party in Maharashtra and elsewhere. Mulayam Singh Yadav is at open war with the Congress. Congress and the TRS are heading for a messy divorce in Andhra. Deve Gowda has acquired such nuisance value in Karnataka that the entire IT sector has risen to protest against mal-governance and mischievous interventions by the politicians of the ruling alliance. The only place a Congress ally has performed well and enhanced the credibility of the Congress Party is in J&K.

And yet, Congressmen in the State use every opportunity to attack and humiliate Mufti. Fortunately, Mufti dextrously deflects attention from their projecting an image of an internally divided coalition by emphasising in all his public meetings the valuable support he has received from the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi, as well as from Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani when they were heading the NDA government. However, he manages to do this without appearing a puppet of the Central Government because he conveys the image that there is a national consensus over redressing the legitimate grievances of the Kashmiri people. This counters the secessionist propaganda that the Indian Government intends to treat Kashmir as its enslaved colony. Consequently, the Kashmiri people have been coming out in thousands to attend the public meetings of national leaders of both the Congress and BJP. Few national leaders dared visit the Valley during the 1990s because of fear of attacks and the embarrassment of facing either deserted streets or violent *hartals*.

Mufti is performing a delicate balancing act as a credible champion of Kashmiri rights without being anti-India. He has steadily built a non-confrontational relationship with the Centre without appearing a stooge of the *Delhi Durbar*. This is a winning combination for India. Kashmiri people turned against India because they felt they were denied the opportunity of self-governance for too long by the Central government appointing puppet chief ministers, many of whom won elections through blatant rigging. In recent years, Congressmen have come to suffer from an additional liability. By convincing themselves that without constantly paying homage to Sonia Gandhi, their political future is unsafe, most of them have developed the



**Reviving the political process; a public meeting in Shia dominated Sonawari, Baramula district**

habit of attributing all major decisions to their Party supremo even while many of the same people do everything to undermine her behind her back. It is unlikely that Mrs. Gandhi expects or respects such slavish behaviour. Unfortunately, too many Congressmen do not realise how this harms the image of their leader and their party. They may get away with such compulsive *stuti gaans* (songs of sycophancy) and duplicitous behaviour in the rest of India but the Kashmiri people are extremely touchy about being told that decisions regarding their fate are all taken in Delhi and that they are not in charge of their own destiny.

Many senior leaders of the Congress admit in private that even though Sonia's historic decision to

let Mufti lead the government after the October 2002 election led to a lot of heartburn in her Party, Mufti has delivered far more than promised and virtually pulled back Kashmir from the brink of self-annihilation. While the Congress is understandably reluctant to pull up those allies which have brought the Party a bad name, it should at least treat with respect an ally who has brought a lot of credit to the Party, won over people to express their political aspirations through democratic means and strengthened India's hands in negotiating a just settlement of the Kashmir issue with Pakistan. An enduring alliance with PDP is required both in the interest of India as well as in the enlightened self-interest of the Congress as a national party. □

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