

THE Kashmir Valley resembles a vast military encampment. More than five lakh regular and para-military soldiers are believed to be deployed. Despite their presence, the local population is so hostile that every now and then (like after the Char-e-Shareif shrine was burned down) the whole Valley has to be put under 24-hour curfew. More than 25,000 people are believed to have lost their lives since the violence began in 1989. All political activity, all political processes have been non-existent for more than five years. The Indian presence is so hated that the men who we send to govern Kashmir on our behalf travel from their homes to their offices under the tightest security and live in homes so heavily guarded that it is impossible for them to meet ordinary Kashmiris or even go for a casual stroll along the Dal lake. Our method of bringing Kashmir to heel has been so unthinking, so brutal that we have managed to alienate virtually every section of Kashmiri society. The police, the bureaucracy, lawyers, doctors, judges, everyone. And what is our latest solution to this grim, intractable problem? Elections.

The prime minister, the Union home minister, and the governor of Jammu and Kashmir began by asserting over and over again that no matter what happens, no matter what Pakistan does to put a spanner in the electoral process, elections will go ahead. As General K.V. Krishna Rao told the BBC, in his usual automaton tones, "We are absolutely determined to go ahead with the elections." While the central government has for the time being given up on forcing immediate elections, admitting that meaningful elections cannot be held under the present circumstances, General Rao and some ministers continue insisting that elections must be held soon.

Too Late, Too Little

Preconditions for Elections in Kashmir

Tavleen Singh

Elections, you must remember, is a pretty bad word in Kashmir. It means rigging, not democracy. Other than two (in 1977 and 1983), most Kashmiri elections have been rigged. It was rigging in 1987, now virtually admitted by all shades of Indian political opinion, that was responsible for the militancy being born in the first place.



Courtesy: Dieter Ludwig

So when our rulers insist, as the prime minister is currently doing, 'that a low-poll is better than no poll', he is showing not just insensitivity but incomprehension. The militant groups, and even reformed militant leaders like Yasin Malik and Shabir Shah, have already made it clear that they will not allow an election to take place. Please remember, that in 1989 when the government, in the face of

popular alienation, insisted on going ahead with polls for the Lok Sabha seats from the Valley, they were an almost complete failure. The militants placed brand new television sets outside some polling booths saying that they could be taken away as free gifts by those who dared to come out and vote. Nobody dared, and we recorded a polling percentage of less than four percent. The violence had not become endemic then. It is now. So if the government insists on going ahead with the poll this time what is likely to happen? Even if political parties, like the National Conference, which want polls, manage to put up candidates, even if polling booths are cordoned off on election day, even if the election is held in stages over several days, can we seriously believe that people will come out to vote? And if nobody does, what will happen to the government's brilliant new solution to our Kashmir problem? We need to keep in mind that the minute elections are announced the entire world press will descend on the Valley. There will be television crews and foreign correspondents in droves, so even if our own press chooses, as it often does, to report less than the whole truth about Kashmir, the world will be able to see exactly what is happening. If the election is a farce it will be seen as such by the international community and even if we manage to instal some kind of government, it will have about as much credibility as General Krishna Rao does.

Elections as a solution could end



Courtesy: Bhawan Singh/India Today

1987 Election campaigning in Kashmir

up being as much of a blunder as almost everything else various governments have done in Delhi since 1986, when Indira Gandhi toppled Farooq Abdullah's government on charges that even then seemed ludicrous. Those, however, were still the days when easy solutions were possible and, ironically, all that needed to have been done to rectify the blunder was to order fresh elections. Had Rajiv Gandhi done this in 1986, Farooq Abdullah would have almost certainly won again and Kashmir's secessionist movement may never have resurfaced. Instead, however, he chose to compound his mother's mistake by insisting on an accord between the Congress and the National Conference, thereby ensuring the suicide of both Kashmir's non-secessionist political parties and also ensuring that Farooq's chances of winning dimmed considerably. Another mistake had to be made to rectify the earlier one, so we had the shamelessly rigged

election of 1987, which made Farooq chief minister but cost him his credibility. It also paved the way for militancy. Several of the youths who crossed over to Pakistan for training had been supporters of Muslim United Front candidates in the 1987 elections. This is now acknowledged by everyone. The militant leaders themselves do not hesitate to admit openly that when they saw what Indian democracy really meant, they realised that the only way to fight for Kashmir's rights was to pick up the gun. So, the AK 47 arrived in the Valley.

In 1989, after Mufti Mohammed Syed's daughter was kidnapped and then bartered for the release of jailed militants, another serious mistake was committed. The Janata Dal government decided that the best man to bring Kashmir back to the straight and narrow was Jagmohan. His administrative skills had, during an earlier stint, won him laurels for cleaning the Dal lake. This was considered ad-

equated reason to send him back despite the fact that Farooq Abdullah, whose earlier government had been dismissed by Jagmohan, made it clear that he would resign if his *bete noire* was reappointed. George Fernandez is believed to have told V.P. Singh that in the clearest terms, but Jagmohan was sent anyway. Farooq resigned. Jagmohan, who believed that a solution could be found through a combination of military and administrative means, decided to crush the militancy as quickly as possible. Within weeks of his arrival, the number of deaths in the Valley had gone into triple digits. Most of them were at the hands of the security forces and not the militants.

In the absence of a popularly elected government, what a politically troubled state like Kashmir needs is not a bureaucrat as governor but someone who is sensitive, at the very least, to political things. Instead, since Jagmohan, Delhi has chosen to send up a former head of RAW

(Research and Analysis Wing) and now a retired general.

To a man, these governors have believed that the solution lies in terrifying Kashmir into submission. To a man, they have told us that “the militants are on the run” and “people are sick of violence”. Girish Chander Saxena started saying this sort of thing within weeks of taking over and appears to have set a trend. The real tragedy, however, is that Delhi has always believed them without once taking into account the reality that those who rule Kashmir have no contact whatsoever with the people, so they cannot possibly know what’s going on. Their access to information is limited further by the almost total collapse of Indian intelligence agencies in the Valley. But Delhi has continued to leave everything in the hands of the Kashmir administration.

Which brings us to the biggest mistake of all: the complete absence of a Kashmir policy. No government since 1989 has had one and Narasimha Rao has set a new record by simply ignoring Kashmir altogether in the hope that this will make the problem



Courtesy: India Today

Grieving women in Kashmir

go away. Kashmir has almost never been discussed at a cabinet meeting. It almost never comes up for debate in Parliament.

Inevitably, then, you get an ad hoc, fire-brigade approach to the problem. When Hazratbal flared up in October 1993, it was left to General Krishna Rao to decide what to do. The fact that nobody was killed and the shrine remained undamaged was considered by Delhi’s rulers as a major success.

They overlooked the fact that more than 60 protesters, who were trying to march to Srinagar to demonstrate against the siege of the shrine, were killed by the Border Security Force in Bijbehara. They also overlooked the fact that the siege of Hazratbal was not considered a major success by Kashmiris.

So, General Krishna Rao was able to retain his job and continue with his fire-brigade approach. He appears to have believed that he could use the same tactics in Charar-e-Sharif. Since there is rarely any serious analysis of these operations in Delhi we will probably never have answers to the following questions. Why, if the government was so keen on preserving religious shrines, did it allow militants to gather in the shrine in the first place? Could they do nothing for two months while the militants were moving around openly, brandishing their arms for television crews and giving interviews to journalists? Could they not have been caught when they were outside the shrine? Why did the security forces wait until the shrine itself was turned into a battlefield? Was it necessary to wait until the whole town was burned to the ground?



Courtesy: Sharad Saxena, India Today

Activists of a pro-Pakistani women’s front *Dukhtarane Millat*

Once the shrine was destroyed the government blamed everything on Pakistan, refusing absolutely to accept any responsibility, any blame for the disaster. Surely, it is the government in Delhi that owes the country an explanation, not the government in Islamabad. These are questions that do not often get asked because, by and large, the Indian press has tended to

be on the government's side when it comes to Kashmir. It is hard to think of any government in Delhi getting away with so many mistakes if, for instance, a similar political problem had existed in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar.

So if elections are not the answer, what is? The problem has now become so complicated, the alienation

of the Kashmiri people so deep, that there are no easy answers left. One thing that does seem to be clear, however, is that it would be better to allow some kind of political process to begin in the Valley, some attempt to curb human rights violations, before we talk of elections. It is a long road to normalcy, but there do not seem to be any short cuts left to take. □

The Pennant

*That day you rolled out of bed
and walked away
I thought this is it
the ultimate Hiroshima-s-hit;*

*I packed up my long future
all dreams
with heavy pure silk saris
and put them in cold storage;
When I looked back
all I saw was you
sprawled over me like the shadows
of Rahu and Ketu;
limb by limb
I was soon eclipsed black
to become just a senseless dot
on a horizon that never existed;*

*You were full of promises
sometimes of a string of jasmine buds
that you would twine around my head
or a walk up a hill
to a blue chinese restaurant
at the end even giving yourself;*

*Too many promises curled out your lips
like a porcelain Buddha's
but where was compassion
and action?*

*That giant step you took out of our life
did it take you to the moon
or was it only the three-feet chair
on a canvas-striped dais
that you coveted?
You have landed it, my friend!*

*Looking back once again I am happy
whatever it was
for a step
that shot me out of afternoons
of stony sleep
and made my self rise in me;*

*Now I turn my freedom on my wrist
like a bridal string of jasmine buds
FREEDOM? FROM WHAT?
WHAT FOR?*

*You think when you salt-and-peppered your pleasures
with me
and belched out my life
by calling me beloved mistress wife
sometimes even sister daughter mother
I did not need freedom
and should not miss it?*

*I've got news for you, my friend,
freedom is only for those who stay with it
steadfastly in deep love
it's a riddle;*

*So now I shall take out my pots and pans
my undreamt dreams and future plans
the whole hog of a woman's kit
from cold storage
and let them fly
the sky's the limit!*

C. Vimala Rao