

Kashmir Policy: Time for Rethinking

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The theft of the sacred relic of the Prophet gave an outlet to the peoples pent-up anger of years of political suppression. It is remarkable that the mass agitation that followed urns completely secular and bore no trace of hostility to India or the Central Government. What was made clear, instead, was that the people had no faith in the present political setup of the State dominated by a clique in the National Conference.

Unfortunately Home Minister Nanda and officers of the Central Government responsible for handling the situation completely misunderstood the mood of the people. Distrust of the people and their leaders, like Maulana Masoodi, has been the keynote of their actions and statements. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the fund of goodwill for the Government of India which was there when the agitation began rapidly drained away.

Errors of omission and commission have already strained the confidence of the people of Kashmir and India's reputation abroad to the utmost. Now, when the people of the State have taken the initiative towards a political clean-up, must New Delhi act to preserve nepotism and corruption?

THE happenings in Kashmir have at once revealed the glory and shame of the Republic of India.

It was India's glorious hour when the people of Kashmir in their wildest mood upheld the standards of secularism and patriotism. The shock over the loss of the hair of Prophet Mohammed had made them mad. In that madness they cast off the fears and temptations that had regimented their life. The pent up anger against a system of corruption and tyranny thus got a massive outlet.

The religiously excited and politically angry mob of Kashmir also demonstrated its faith in communal harmony and its rejection of the two nations theory. It expressed its confidence in the basic values of India, the people of the rest of India and (naively) the Government of India.

There could hardly have been a happier situation for India than to find so much goodwill in an area where the people had been denied the opportunity to live as decent human beings and whose loyalty was continuously being tampered with by its co-religionist neighbour.

The opportunity was seized by New Delhi to demonstrate its skill in how not to influence people and lose friends. The men in Delhi who were the props behind the present Kashmir set-up could not believe that Kashmiris had forgiven them for foisting on them so unpopular a regime. They became panicky on seeing Kashmiris breaking their shackles and shouting fearlessly — though not against India.

The Home Minister saw an anti-national hand behind the agitation. Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed heard only the slogans of plebiscite in the turmoil. The Home Secretary branded the movement and its leaders as Pakistanis.

What a pass the Indian revolution has come to—a bureaucratic remnant of the British empire suspecting the patriotism of a leader like Maulana Mohammed Saeed Masoodi, a captain of the freedom movement who had led his people in defence against Pakistani raiders and been hit by a bullet while doing so! Can a democratic country allow anybody to arrogate to himself the right to pass judgments on the patriotism of his countrymen in so sweeping a manner? Was it confusion arising from ignorance of facts or a grievous error of judgment?

Played into Pakistan's Hands

Were the men in authority so ignorant of the possible use or misuse of their statements across the border? Pakistan's interpretation of the events in Kashmir is that the people are in revolt against India and for joining Pakistan. And Nanda, Bakshi and Vishwanathan have earned the distinction of being the ace witnesses of Pakistan's case. Even if the Intelligence Service (not entirely incapable of unintelligent service) had discovered some Pakistani traits in the movement or its leaders, unnoticed by other observers, how far was it politically expedient to give it publicity and thus encouragement? And why is the evidence being withheld?

If you insist on reading political meaning in the current movement, the only permissible deductions are:

- (a) Kashmir's faith in secular politics is unshaken;
- (b) Its popular leadership is capable and dependable;
- (c) It has no faith in the present State Government;
- (d) It is willing to trust the Centre.

The sensible course for the Centre was to: (a) appreciate the trust reposed in it; (b) maintain a pose of impartiality; (c) remove the causes currently agitating the popular mind; and (d) taking the popular leaders into confidence, seek long-term solutions of the problems that are presently causing embarrassment to the country, both internally and externally,

Distrust of the people and their leaders is the keynote of New Delhi's handling of the situation. The movement was given a secular start by G M Karra, who in a powerful speech reminded lakhs of his listeners of the expectations of Gandhi ji from Kashmir. He got an assurance from every member of his audience that even under the worst provocations every non-Muslim would remain perfectly safe. Karra along with G M Shah and M S Qureshi and others, known for their secular politics, was immediately hauled up. Is this the reward for secular and responsible politics? Why was the religiously excited mass exposed to the grave risks of leaderlessness?

Luckily, Kashmir did not lack in leadership. Maulana Mohammed Saeed Masoodi rose to the occasion,

disciplined the movement and offered a hand of cooperation to the Central authorities. It is ominous for the political health of the country that a man of his integrity, stature and patriotism should be treated with such scant respect. Restrictions have been imposed on his meetings and movements. He and his Action Committee have been treated with discourtesy and suspicion.

The Central officers did a remarkable job in demolishing the popular confidence in the Union Government. Apart from their provocative utterances, the manner of investigation into the theft of the holy relic helped in creating mysteries and raising doubts. How could the thief return the relic to the original place without being noticed by the guards and the crowd? Who are the culprits? At the time of recovery of the relic, it was promised that their names would be announced a day later. What transpired during that fateful night to warrant withholding of the names for about a month? And in what capacity could Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed claim the knowledge of the culprits who, he said, were in police custody? Why should he be allowed to create the impression that he is associated with the investigations when the whole of Kashmir is pointing an accusing finger at his family for not only the current episode but for all its ills? And why should the Home Minister go out of his way to exonerate his family when the results of the investigations were still secret? If the impression spreads that the culprits are being shielded, we have only to thank our own officers and leaders.

Again, why were Maulana Masoodi and his Action Committee not allowed to see the holy relic? They were invited to identify it by the Director of the Central Intelligence Bureau. After keeping them waiting from 8 p m to 3 a m, they were asked to go as the genuineness of the relic had been established without their aid.

It is said that the Maulana was not considered competent to identify the relic. Under what Islamic or secular law was the Home Secretary, who made the announcement, more competent? Could not the Government get a single Muslim to confirm the identification? If the Home Secretary made the announcement on the basis of assurance given

to him by some competent Muslims why are not their names made public?

Let me quote from a letter Maulana Masoodi wrote to a friend in New Delhi, to show his anxiety to be helpful and his frustration. He had assured the Director of Intelligence that "though we believe in Government's announcement about the genuineness of the relic, yet to defeat *agent-provocateurs* and Radio Pakistan's propaganda, it is necessary that from among the pious and God-fearing people who have been seeing the holy relic for years, a few should be asked to confirm its genuineness and their verdict should be broadcast on the radio".

People's Voice Dubbed Pakistani

The Home Secretary responded to these earnest entreaties by declaring publicly that "anybody demanding further proof that the recovered relic was in fact the hair of the Prophet would be speaking the voice of Pakistan and speaking in the interests of malicious, false, foul and mischievous propaganda". Could anybody demolish India's case in Kashmir and defend that of Pakistan more effectively than by officially dubbing the millions of voices in the Valley demanding identification of the relic as Pakistan's voice?

It was officially explained to me that the relic was in fact seen by a thousand people who were present at the time of its restoration to the Shrine late at night. Who were the thousand? On what basis were they invited? Hardly a few hours before that the Maulana had been counselling his audience on the strength of official information to wait for a few days more for the restoration of the relic. Why was he put to embarrassment by changing the programme? And why were he and his colleagues not invited on the auspicious occasion? When a thousand persons, as is claimed, could see the relic, under what law is it denied to the twelve members of the Action Committee? If Bakshi can claim to have seen it, why cannot Maulana? Why has its exhibition been postponed to February 6? Why is suspense prolonged and doubts strengthened?

If the people of Kashmir had any difficulty in shaking their trust in the Centre, it was sought to be removed by the complete identification of the Central officers with the State authorities. It is the Central officers

who issued the unpopular and repressive orders which it was the job of the local officers to make. Constitutionally, it was unauthorised. It only helped them to flaunt their authority—a rare opportunity for Central officers in any other State. Politically and constitutionally they were expected to act through the local authorities and to maintain their impartiality and their separate entity. The combination of policies on Kashmir thus succeeded in creating the impression that considerations other than justice were weighing with the authorities. But what are those considerations that are more important than the satisfaction of the people of Kashmir, the merits of the theft case, the good name of India and peace in the sub-continent?

Is there a method in this madness? What purpose—and whose—does it serve to befog the issues? Or was it a deliberate attempt to divert the popular wrath from Srinagar to New Delhi?

If there is a master mind behind all this who contrived to twist the situation for definite objectives of his own, hats off to his ingenuity and success. But those in New Delhi cannot be accused of being conscious of the objectives of the master mind and the ingenuity of his method. In their case, it was perhaps only a collapse of nerves. The capital was found wanting in statesmanship when statesmanship was needed most. Was it due to Pandit Nehru's absence from the active scene or to the preoccupation of the rest with the struggle for succession?

Errors of omission and commission in Kashmir, which we are supposed to defend at international forums as a patriotic duty, have been piling up; they lie heavily on every Indian conscience, sully the Indian image abroad and inhibiting her moves in the international field. Now when the people of Kashmir have taken the initiative in cleaning the Augean stable, must the Government of India rally to defend and preserve nepotism and corruption? It is no more the feeble voice of dissent of a handful of sensitive Indians. Justice for Kashmir and national interest are not in conflict. There is hardly anything more patriotic at the present juncture than to speak out against the present Kashmir policy.