

Kashmir Revisited

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Editor's Note: Claire Galez, a researcher, Human Rights activist, is a specialist on South Asia. She had visited Kashmir including Pakistan Occupied Kashmir three years ago. She came out with a report: 'Kashmir: On the Chess Board of South Asia'. She recently visited Kashmir again after a gap of three years. This article is based on her latest impressions about Kashmir. –Ed.

As I step out of plane, a fresh breeze touches my face. I close my eyes for a while. Even with my eyes closed, I can feel that I am in Kashmir. I was visiting Kashmir Valley after a gap of 3 years during which several developments had taken place in the State. The most important of which was the conduct of two sets of elections, to the Parliament and the State Assembly. Following the elections to the Assembly in September 1996, an elected government had taken over the administration of the State.

As I move out of Airport and the taxi passes through the city, I can feel the change. I notice a lot of activity going on normally. People are moving, the bazaars are hustling and bustling with crowds, children are coming or going to schools. A sea change since the last time when I visited Valley. I try to converse with the taxi driver who, in his broken English, tells me frankly (unlike earlier times) that; "We are missing the tourists, who used to throng valley like herds." It was encouraging. There is a yearning for the restoration of earlier normal and peaceful times.

I visited Mughal Garden overlooking picturesque Dal Lake. The gardens were packed with local population, men, women and children. I later went to Gulmarg and Pahalgam—the famous tourist spots in Kashmir. I saw caravans of cars and buses coming and going. On my way to Gulmarg, I was caught in a traffic jam, which lasted for a few hours. This exuberant participation of the people in outdoor activities is perhaps a celebration of release from the constant cycle of mind-numbing violence which had held Kashmiris in its grip for most of the last decade. The people's desire for peace and an end to violence is unmistakably evident in every interaction with the people of Kashmir. They are looking for jobs, industry and the return of tourism and they seized the elections as an opportunity to settle the conflict and reinstall a democratic government, which would reflect these desires.

I was there on July 13, which is celebrated as Martyr's day in Kashmir. During my last visit no celebration was held because militants had placed a ban on the celebration. This time again, All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) placed a ban on Martyr's day celebrations. However, National Conference (NC), the ruling party, organised a function to commemorate the Martyr's Day in Srinagar, which was attended by a large number of people. The separatist leader, Mr. Shabir Shah,

defying the APHC ban, also held a separate function to commemorate the Martyrs Day. He was, perhaps, responding to the public mood.

The NC secured an unprecedented mandate from the people in the Assembly elections. The party seems to have plunged in the elections after gauging the changing sentiments of the people it is also important to remember, as emphasised by many people with whom I met, that the NC is in fact, the party which has traditionally represented Kashmiri interests. But in the present mandate, the party has moved the party well beyond this circumscribed role, as it has received tremendous support also from the Jammu and Ladakh regions. This has positioned the party as a representative of all the three regions of the State. This development and international recognition of the democratically held elections has forced the separatist political leaders to look beyond the Valley and mobilise support in the Jammu region. The Hurriyat Conference has opened a Jammu chapter with a 23 members committee, in March this year, while Shabir Shah has been frequently visiting the region to enroll new members into his party.

APHC, which once claimed to represent the people of Kashmir, is no longer a credible force in Kashmir. It has not been able to formulate any concrete programme besides repeatedly calling for 'hartals' (Bandhs) which has led to it being derisively labelled the 'Hartal Conference'. Although the people still respond to Hurriyat strike calls, this is more to pressurise the government into addressing their concerns than to demonstrate their support for the Hurriyat. Even in their calls for bandhs, there is no unanimity within the APHC. Even the Valley press is questioning their credentials to lead the 'movement'.

In this environment, there is considerable unanimity amongst the intelligentsia, which was quite evident during my interactions with several of them, that in the quest of a new leadership in Jammu and Kashmir, Shabir Shah, is the only personality with some degree of acceptability in Kashmir today. Later, I myself met Shabir, after a long gap and discovered that there had been considerable evolution in his own thinking. He is now openly and categorically against militancy and has dissociated himself from militant outfits. Significantly, Shabir, insists that Kashmir is a political problem and not territorial dispute, and is willing to talk to all responsible quarters to explore all possible avenues for a negotiated settlement towards the resolution of Kashmir problem.

On the other hand, the State Government started with very high expectations from the people of a rapid transformation of the situation in Kashmir. There has been some progress towards eliminating militancy in the Valley with militant groups no longer having a free run of the place. This has contributed in no small measure to easing of tensions among the people. As the fear of gun has receded, the people have increasingly begun to demand good governance from the administration. Especially in the towns, the atmosphere has changed radically since the Farooq Abdullah government assumed office in October 1996. However, although Dr. Farooq Abdullah understands these changing sentiments and is responding to them, he himself is too burdened with problems to directly monitor and supervise progress across such a broad agenda. He, unfortunately, does not have an equally responsive and perceptive team, which can ensure an effective institutionalised response to the people's needs. This is holding back the administration from fully meeting these demands and some disappointment among the people is already becoming evident. The remaining summer months, therefore, will be crucial if the government is to redeem its promises of effective governance.

Besides this, the question of human rights violations continues to be a serious issue on which the APHC has fallen back, to remain relevant in Kashmir. In fact, some Kashmiri militant groups have managed to infiltrate several human rights NGOs in the west and have confused the real issues in Kashmir in the minds of Western policy makers. There is a need to balance the allegations made by such separatist groups with the understanding that militants also have been violating human rights in the name of 'freedom struggle'. In this context, the activities of the so-called friendly militants continue to cause concern among the people. It is important to remember that the people returned to democracy to escape violence, and the unchecked violence perpetrated by these friendly militants could undermine the very legitimacy of the democratic system.