

**Jammu and Kashmir :
The Dawn Will Surely Come**

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Jammu and Kashmir is these days torn by violence and bloodshed. Several people and groups moved by seven years of long turmoil have started making frantic efforts for restoration of normal public life in the state. Visit to Jammu and Kashmir has become high on the agenda of many, which is useful in forging close ties with the people and which provides a better understanding of the realities.

A visit of the Gandhi Peace Foundation sponsored three-member team to Jammu and Kashmir was a step ahead in this direction. It was a follow-up of the week-long peace mission of eminent personalities who on return to Delhi stressed upon the identification of different facets of linkage building with the people of Kashmir. The other purpose of being in Jammu and Kashmir at the threshold of parliamentary elections was to appreciate the nature of developments in the intervening period and possibilities of a goodwill visit of concerned citizens from all over the country to the state.

All the three members of the team, which visited Jammu and Kashmir from 25 to 31 March 1996, were drawn on the basis of their special interest in the area. Mr P.V. Rajagopal, Secretary, Gandhi Peace Foundation, who led the team, was also a member of the first delegation; Mr Ramesh Sharma, who heads the youth cell was earlier an active worker during the difficult days of Punjab, and Dr S.M. Abbas, who pursues issues of Indian minorities, was the third member. The presentation that follows here is the outcome of this visit and it places emphasis on people's life and conditions.

Travelling by Public Transport

Travelling in Jammu and Kashmir was done by road. The team stayed at Jammu, Banihal, and Srinagar. It gave us the opportunity to understand

difficulties in travelling between Jammu and Srinagar. It took about twenty-two hours to reach Srinagar from Jammu, whereas return from the valley consumed nearly thirty-six hours due to bad weather. The period of January to March is one of the incessant rain, hail, sleet, and snow all over the valley. Frequent landslides also impeded movement during the return journey. Thus we felt that the goodwill trip by road need to be organized only after this period. On way there are some towns where the group can stay at the small tourist hotels and Gurudwaras to meet local populace.

The friendly and helping attitude of our co-travellers, who were men and women of various faiths and regions of the state, was quite impressive. The boredom of the long hours of return journey, which also entailed endless wait for road conditions and other safety concerns, clearance from security forces, was met by humour and affection of the passengers who gradually became acquainted with each other to exchange pleasantries and smiles.

On both the occasions we had to stay at Banihal, the onward journey stay was in a very small hotel, whereas night stay on return was in a modestly furnished J&K Government tourist dormitory. The female passengers, a woman and three young girl students, two Ladakhi Muslims and a Kashmiri Pandit studying medicine in Srinagar, put up night stay at a Gurudwara. The evening stay was very memorable as many young friends aired their views on militancy in the valley and sang on request popular *ghazals* from the Hindi-Urdu cinema and Kashmiri folklore. A constructive workers' song by Ramesh Sharma was also not missing on that occasion.

Banihal by being situated between high security zone, Nehru tunnel located at the outskirts of Srinagar and landslide-prone dangerous curves leading to Jammu becomes the obvious choice to assess the situation on either side. Banihal also holds interest for another reason, that is, by virtue of being a buffer zone where both the regional as well as accompanying communal character of Jammu and Srinagar get down to a minimum level.

Our journey gave us the impression that the civilian population is by now accustomed to waiting for hours to facilitate movement of the military vehicles—both up and down. The irony is that the civilian population remains stuck up without even those small pieces of information which affect them most. Something needs to be urgently done to improve the communication system. Making things worse is the one-way and turn-wise traffic arrangement between Jammu and Srinagar. Traffic on the road is allowed alternatively, one day from Jammu and the other day from Srinagar.

Security Forces

The most usual sight on the roads is the movement of the security forces with sophisticated equipments and weaponries. This is true for the entire valley, the stretch of villages before Srinagar, and the city itself have most

visible presence of the security forces in quite a good number and in a most alert combating form. Watch towers, bunkers, and patrol parties have become an inseparable part of life.

Even weather vagaries do not deter personal check operation of the security forces who, unmindful of even dizzlings, stop vehicles, make passengers come out with their handbags and other luggage to perform their vowed duty. On the other hand, the Jammu and Kashmir Police posted along with them, in view of passengers' inconvenience, plays it light. A divide between the two was also visible as the soft peddling of the J&K Police used to be resisted by outbursts of the forces.

We came across a large number of youth in the valley who at one point of time or other were put in judicial custody and interrogated. Many of them before their release, to make sure that they have not been associated in any insurgency activities, were taken to various detention centers for identification by the inmates. A number of students informed us of their thrashing. The sword of suspicion for sympathy with the militants seemed hanging on the head of every Kashmiri youth. This has exerted its own influence on the impressionable mind of those who visualize oppression in every move of the Establishment.

People are generally agitated about this shabby treatment. They have been hurt and nursing mutilated ego in one of the overlongs in Srinagar. We had also a taste of the strict army vigil, when we, on our way back to our hotel, joined two Kashmiri youth sitting by the side of Chenab embankment. It was refreshing to sit on the parapet facing a poverty-stricken old residential area which overlooked the majestic flow of their river whose water, as we were informed by the Kashmiri youth, remains mostly clean except in the snow-melting season. It was after some twenty minutes that a boy delivered a message in Kashmiri dialect that the assembly be better dispersed which was immediately complied with. It was soon realised that we were under the range of an armed force picket established in the nearby building of a temple trust. The local youth smiled to say as if this was a commonplace occurrence there. On walking past the building, we were halted and questions were hurled at us. We were let off with the cryptic but harsh remark "Yeh log Dili ki Yahan billi bana denge," which may have implied trouble in staying late. After all dawn brings here *Azan*, the call for the faithfuls to pray but with the approach of dusk, the streets of the city wear a deserted look and are almost desolate except for the men in uniform.

The security forces had also an uphill task to achieve—restoration of peace—at the point of gun as no other option was explored by the government. Initially they worked under extreme pressure, the option was to either kill or get killed. Security forces, by their training, had to opt for the former, which later got a further going with the counter-insurgency forces of Ikhwanul Muslimoon. It is widely believed to be promoted by the Military Intelligence wing. Thus the military and paramilitary forces along with the counter-insurgency groups played a joint role in reducing militancy.

Though 27th and 28th of March being days of strike and bandh were unusual days in Srinagar, there had been reports of exchange of fire between militants and forces in one locality in the morning and near another in the afternoon. We were told that very often terrorists with the onset of evening start air firing to perpetuate a tense atmosphere. Notwithstanding these minor isolated events, people feel more secure in moving out than ever before. Educational institutes and offices have started functioning. Some Pandit families have returned back to Srinagar. We were able to conduct a dialogue with the people without fear or hesitation and walk around in Srinagar in spite of the strike and the *bandh*. After seven years of high level of militancy, the situation is becoming less and less tense. People in general feel that the militancy has come down to a great extent. Security forces are turning to developmental work. Rashtriya Rifles is also helping the local forest department in its afforestation work. There are officers and also jawans in the forces who are humane enough to impress local people.

However, the trail is somewhat brazen and people in general are losing hope of any basic change through violence. Military presence is still dominant, civilian administration faces are missing. Complaints of military excess is common. The body of human rights activist and advocate Jalil Andrabi was fished out from a local river. The killing was linked with Rashtriya Rifles to curb his presentation at the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. He is said to have survived earlier attempts on his life by the men of counter-insurgency. His killing led to the extension of strike to 27 and 28 as the valley observed *bandh* till 26 March against the killing of militants near the Hazrat Bal shrine. Soaring of anti-India sentiment was visible in the speeches of Huriyat leaders assembled at Idgah for the last rites.

The slain activist was later laid to rest at the site where local heroes killed in the aftermath of militancy are buried which, in the parlance of Huriyat, is martyrs' ground.

Intellectuals of the valley, highlighting the darker side of army operations, struck a cord of sympathy by asking who would remain mum on seeing violation of the fundamental rights. In a veiled reference to the cases of molestations, they feared Kashmir as a bad training ground for the future peacekeeping operations of the security forces. Many feel that the security forces have been given extremely free hand to tackle militancy in whatever way they wished. In a complete role reversal, militant leaders have started fearing attack on their lives like anything. A second rocket attack on the house of Syed Ahmed Shah Geelani was attempted who was saved by not being in Srinagar. His bedroom on the first floor was badly damaged.

There is also the view in certain quarters that the promotion of counter-insurgency is providing more social sanction to the stand of "pro-movement militants." A free-lance journalist, elaborating the thesis, said that the

money in the counter-insurgency has allured all those who had come to be associated with the militancy in its peak heydays. This has left pro-movement militants with the men of some character, whereas money related crimes of the counter-insurgents are on the rise. No wonder, people in these circumstances may again look with the hope towards militants and their leadership. Eye witnesses (names and addresses withheld) narrated how the counter-insurgency group waylay people on the backup support of the forces. One of the victims, a Sikh businessman of Punjab, who went to lodge a complaint, was told by a major of a security force to forget the money as it was not lost but went to national service (*desh sewa*).

A very unfortunate fall-out of the prevailing scenario was the communal line of divide on the perception of the role of the militants, security forces, and counter-insurgents. Many Kashmiri Pandits, as affected worst by the militancy of earlier days, though not happy with the excess, favour military and counter-insurgency operations. Hardliners elsewhere, not agreeing with the soft view of Kashmiri Pandits, advocate even stepped-up operations. The Kashmiris, on the other hand, have forgotten scars inflicted by the militants. Turning oblivious to the freedom brought by reduced militancy, they have become extremely sensitive to the presence of both the security forces and counter-insurgents in the valley.

The Kashmiri Pandits

During our brief stay at Banihal, we witnessed an uncomfortable moment in the form of a very mild clash of opinion on the role of security forces between Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims whom we refer in this document as Kashmiris. The discussion soon became goody, goody because of the change in the stand of Kashmiri Pandit friend who had earlier said that the security forces were only doing their duty. He proceeded further to voice for the preservation of *Kashmiriyat*. However, on being alone later, he spoke differently to us. He also said that as the situation had improved, payment of weekly toll from the business groups to the militant group(s) was no more being demanded.

It is no coincidence that within minutes of our arrival at the Jammu railway station, a very old Sarvodya worker wished us to meet Kuka Perry, as his group, in his opinion, was helping the government in a very rightful and nationalist manner. The gentleman who migrated to Jammu about ten years ago has a spiritual bent of mind.

Our meeting with another Kashmiri Pandit was not so different who said that the militant leaders did not usually mean all that they said. A bitterness on the part of Kashmiri Pandits was noted, whereas Kashmiri leaders apparently displayed magnanimity in their attitude. It does imply that some serious misunderstanding exists which initially forced Pandits to leave their place they loved. Many Pandits do themselves admit that they left their houses more in panic than because of any real threat.

Whereas there were also who faced direct threat on their lives and had no option but to leave, there are also various shades of opinion on this sensitive issue.

Now the issue is not whether they were encouraged more by vested power groups or forced to leave the valley. Return to valley of the families living in pathetic conditions elsewhere only gathers urgency. Otherwise refuge of Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu, where they are in good number, and elsewhere may always fail any amicable solution of the Kashmir problem. It is good, though unparalleled, that some sufferings of the people are being mitigated by the provision of salary to all those who worked in the government offices of Srinagar and living allowance to other families.

It is good that some of the militant leaders have realised their folly and now plead Kashmiri Pandits to come back. The ball is in the court of these leaders, whose sincerity may help their brethren return to their homeland and in turn frustrate a communal design hatched by the vested interests. The latter includes a very high-profile malicious plan of fanatic groups across the border to emotionally woo Kashmiris on the ground of common religious affiliation and also attempt of the rightist groups of our domestic politics to make mileage out of the Kashmir trouble and the difficulties of Kashmiri Pandits. The plight of Kashmiri Pandits has in turn multiplied. They also do not show much enthusiasm for launching any struggle to stay back. A natural corollary of the same has emerged in some quarters which resent the idea of keeping the Pandit community in Jammu and Delhi by paying them. The gesture, it is feared, may make them lax from making sincere efforts to go back. After all, religious minorities living in some parts of the country have resisted machinations of perverse minds to remain firmly rooted on their homeland. At the same time we fully agree with a Kashmiri Pandit who said "as it was the first occasion, we got scared at their loss of sanity; if it would have kept happening, we would have by now adopted some adjustment mechanism to face eruption of hostile behaviour."

Some Kashmiri Pandits have returned to Kashmir and others feel like following their footsteps. Mr Rattan Lal Tikku, an employee of Shri Gandhi Ashram, had left the valley for Jammu in June 1990 and returned two years ago in August 1994. He said that he returned as people here live in harmony. Mr Tikku has returned alone leaving his family at Jammu and stays not at his ancestral residence but at the Ashram. However, his time-old ties with the people are not severed, as his erstwhile neighbours on coming to know of his return sent him a message to meet them before their departure for Hajj pilgrimage. The reunion had been in a very emotionally surcharged atmosphere and his neighbours embraced him to weep bitterly.

We also happened to meet Mr Kaul, a businessman who was able to stay on without much difficulty and his business is in some shape in spite of the very bad times. But he has also shifted his family to Jammu and does not intend to bring them back. However, families of other Kashmiri Pandits

have stayed back in his immediate neighbourhood. He said that he was also not expanding his business due to uncertainty about the future of the region.

Dr Sultan of Huriyat Conference said that the Kashmiri Pandits are like big brothers to the Kashmiri Muslims whom they looked to with respect. According to him, Kashmiri Pandits played an important role in the popularisation of education among the Muslims of the valley, a job which their own leaders and aristocracy could never attempt. In some cases, Kashmiri Pandits even taught religious scriptures. He then cited the example of a small village with predominantly unlettered population, whose mosque clergy was initiated in Koranic recitation by none else than a Kashmiri Pandit. We found some of the Muslims of the Baramulla area still carrying the title "Pandit" with their names.

Traditionally Kashmiri Pandits have remained an inseparable part of Kashmiri culture. Their fondness for non-vegetarian food is well-known. A change in the time-old practice is being noticed and beef is very gradually, almost clandestinely, finding its place in some of the markets of Srinagar.

The Composite as Kashmiriyat

The ethos of the distinctiveness of the region in terms of ecology, lifestyle, and civilizational legacy makes a case for *Kashmiriyat*. It includes respect and tolerance for religion and culture of the valley which is in fact the source of Kashmiri people's strength. After the Kashmiri Pandits, the most visible presence in the valley was found to be that of the Sikhs. Identified by their turban, they were everywhere, from the shops in the main market to the transportation business. Throughout Jammu & Kashmir, main road routes and towns have hotels and Dhabas known as Vaishnav, Hindu, Punjabi, and Muslim hotels. Kashmiris not only relish their dishes but also indulge in a lot of praise for them.

We tasted and enjoyed the aroma of the Kashmiri Qahwa, which is in essence hot water boiled in little of saffron and not the tea leaf. Traditional Kashmiri tea is of salt and not sugar, which may not be everybody's cup of tea. Special bread in various forms is available in a good number of shops to be eaten with tea. Bakery items too are very delicious and popular.

People in the valley speak the Kashmiri dialect and write in Urdu. It is, however, ironical that Kashmiri which was earlier taught in the school was soon on its way out and the entire emphasis was placed on learning and writing Urdu. Gurudwaras, temples, mosques, and shrines were found everywhere. In this land of Sufi-rishi tradition, an average mosque depicted Tibetan influence in its architecture. Selection for Hajj pilgrimage is a matter of joy. Feasts thrown on such occasions ensure participation of close relatives, neighbours, and friends.

Though people of the valley are easy going and fatalist who feel that the turmoil may be over only when the Almighty wishes it, they have tremendous inner strength. Seven years of militancy and its disastrous fall-

out have left a negative impact on the families. This may even have long-term effect on the minds of children who are growing up watching trouble all around. But they maintain their zeal to live and fashion their destiny. Their courtesy and mannerism are impressive and generally lack feeling of personal vendetta. Intemperate language against India is heard at the congregations held to pay tribute to the victims of militancy. Perhaps this is the reason why the valley still attracts large-scale seasonal migration of labour folks and artisans, from as distant places as Bihar, Chhattisgarh of Madhya Pradesh, neighbouring Himachal Pradesh, and Punjab.

Presence of women in public was sizeable. Girl students were seen moving in and out, as if for their educational institutions, in quite a good number. Cricket, a favourite game of Kashmiri lads, was in full swing on all the roads and bylanes which were deprived of vehicular movement due to *bandh*.

Young people feel insulted when they are to travel around with the identity card or when they are treated badly at the time of a crackdown. "What is our mistake and why are we treated so badly" are the questions they openly raise. However, they know how to address themselves to difficult phases of life with amazing resilience. Kashmiri youth, who have taken up to long drive negotiate dangerous curves very skilfully. A road journey in public transport, driven by them, will always amuse you by the Hindi songs, locally produced skit, and humour. Unlike those who have been inflicted, youth fearing maltreatment at the hands of law-enforcing agencies in Delhi and other regions of the country are not easily deterred from taking business trips to these places. Like any businessman, they also have strong connections with the trading centers dealing in particular items.

Economy

We happened to meet a businessman in Srinagar who had come from as far as Goa to promote the sale of his medical and surgical instruments. But as a matter of fact, the economy of common people is in bad shape. Repeated calls for *bandh* have affected the lives of the people very badly. Tourism in the state has come to a standstill and hotel and transportation business has declined. It is a great pity that the houseboats, crafted at the expense of lakhs of rupees, which are completely self-contained units with the provisions of comfort and luxury, stand anchored in redundancy. Houseboat owners, who inherited the skills in traditional hospitality, have resorted to rickshaw driving and manual labour for eking out subsistence. State promotion to tourism was apparent from the drinking water connections provided to houseboats and boatmen's admission of cash assistance in the past from the government.

We then thought of those people who, in order to enforce most visible paralysis of valley's normal life, are putting a damper on one of the greatest tourist attractions. The ideological refrain of narrowing avenues

which provided opportunities of lasciviousness to tourists is also not far behind.

Apart from the unemployment of those displaced from their time-old means of livelihood, no avenues of expansion have been attempted. Even the fancy of global economy has not reached the valley. The number of educated unemployed is swelling and there is much frustration emerging out of this situation. Unemployment of the professionally qualified persons is cited to drive home bleak absorption prospects in the state. During our visit to Jammu and Kashmir, we found the medicos sitting on a long stretched *Dharna* to no response from the state and the local papers were coming out with adequate coverage of their demands. Continuation of the present situation for some more time may ruin economy and drive people to im-poverished conditions.

Weaving in silk and carpets, a household industry of Kashmir, has been also on the decline as neither enough material nor marketing opportunities are available. State government had earlier done a lot of work to promote silk weaving. Kashmiri shawls are also not being vigorously pushed for marketing. Mr X (name withheld), a bearded man like other Kashmiri youth who weaves silk with his family members, had sustained blows of security forces in one of its rampages at his home and also outside. This has frightened him and he prefers selling finished products to the collectors at home than taking them to the city sales outlets for a fair price. Due to similar reasons he has even stopped visiting his maternal grand parents' place located at Banihal. We assume Mr X has a background for his troubles as his brother is associated with the intellectual work of Huriyat Conference. But is it enough reason for the harassment? The indirect curtailment of peoples' freedom, that too to such an extent, is a question which merits adequate public discussion.

Leadership in the Valley

But who should start a dialogue on the issues of immense civilian importance? It is a very common belief in the valley that those who left Kashmir in distress but under the blaze of publicity and tantrum were the Pandits, whereas the upper echelons of the Kashmiris left the valley very swiftly to breathe in a more secure and democratic environment. In the absence of any strong voice of resistance, the notion of independent Kashmir, which was basically a dream of some of the intellectuals and the upper middle class, got completely conducive atmosphere for a more aggressive logical trial. The concept of armed struggle was introduced by them with the belief that it would yield quick results. Ordinary people were caught in this design. Now counter-insurgency forces are using the same method and the people are caught in the crossfire. At the moment, militants as well as the public at large realise the limitations of an extended armed struggle.

But a positive development took place at the front of political leadership. As the hostilities started and a few genuine leaders were martyred at the

altar of extremism, leaders who were at the helm of state affairs for a long time and political philosophers left the valley for Delhi and abroad. People started losing faith in them and to repose it in those who were present to face hardships and also ready to go to jail. People were distressed by the terror of their gun totting youth and also by their elimination at the hands of law enforcement agencies and their allies. They took jail birds, who meticulously made their case by the loopholes of our polity, as a symbol of their struggle. The leaders of the armed struggle came to be called pro-movement leaders.

The leaders of various shades and stature who were not in jail did not fail people in those difficult times. Whether in the era of militancy or its violent suppression by different forces, they maintained their facade of presence amidst people. They sympathized with the people, gave shoulders to the coffin of militants, and spread the message of the identity of *Kashmiriyat*. With the increased familiarity on the separatist ideology and wild allegations on the state for its repression, the obscure militant leader Shabir Shah, who had completed fifteen years in jail by 1990, suddenly turned popular. Even local media which had not been giving importance to his news went to cover him and his brand of people in a big way.

Militant Leadership Consolidates Itself

Successive unfair elections, except the one under the regime of Morarji Desai, were made another potent weapon by the militant leadership to justify its stand. Kashmiris were already sore over the issue. The rigging of the 1987 assembly elections and the subsequent harassment of opposition party workers by the then ruling party provided much needed articulation to the disgruntled elements. In fact, it is not strange as states with inner strength have risen against forced leadership. But the matter in Jammu & Kashmir was seized by the vested interest groups. Citing the last election of 1987 which severely frustrated their hopes in the democratic process, political workers, students, and local journalists even today sound unanimous in legitimizing the consequential militancy.

There would have been no opportune moments for the believers of a violent separatist movement, who organised it by way of vigorous public education to take up aggressive struggle for people's rights. The bogey of availability of professional courses and jobs was also raised. A student movement, by a toll of twenty students, which was started over the issue of admission of the Kashmiri Muslims in a local medical college, took the entire valley in its grip. Public protest on ten-paise power tariff hike in which nine people were killed, to whom the government later referred as militants, turned out to be the real starting-point of militancy.

The situation was exploited with the help of Pakistani propaganda. Hindu-Muslim divide in the country was also conveniently used for a separatist design. Later, army excesses and its general nature of apathy towards the culture and faith of the people, rise of rightist leaders in the

other parts of the country, and the Babri Mosque demolition further tilted the balance in their favour. Negligible presence of Muslims in the rank and file of the security forces and military, which are traditionally raised on anti-Pakistani sentiments, provide little opportunity for an understanding of the local people. Militant leadership further whipped up the sentiments by floating the idea of Nizame Mustafa, the Muslim theocracy based administration. To the fear of many, the sentiment was reflected in the militants' ire on cinema halls and liquor lobby. Till date, the cinema halls are closed in Srinagar and prohibition stands imposed for the entire valley. Militants earlier used to regularly check against the consumption of intoxicants in different hotels and restaurants.

Later, militant leaders, realising the limitations of the parochial war waged by them, came together under the banner of Huriyat Conference to grab the political space. The invitation to the Kashmiri Pandits to be back to the valley is a reflection of the same emerging thought. As the war of Huriyat Conference shifts from bullet to the roundtables, the strategy is being reoriented. On the one hand, the accession is being challenged by drum beating it as a myth and conditional to the referendum, whereas, on the other, Indo-Pakistani dialogue is being emphasised to end uncertainty over the issue of Kashmir. The youth political workers say that they, like their previous two generations, have grown up in the worst kind of uncertainties and it should be now brought to an end.

The leaders and their spokesmen do harp on peace for Kashmir but remain silent on the scope of peace in the existing framework. In a virtual exploitation of the situation in their favour, the immediate need is third-party intervention. The militant leadership wishes it, feeling that it would provide them more than what they would be otherwise getting after so much sacrifice. The theory of more desperate outside intervention is being believed by the people. Due to a high-level outside interest in the affairs of the valley, it is feared by the local intellectuals and youth that decline in militancy may be tried to be enlivened by influx of a large number of militants from countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and even Sudan.

The announcement of parliamentary elections was said to be premature which was made without taking people into confidence. In this way our government displayed its urgency to reach a unilateral decision without appreciating the real conditions of the people. The announcement of the elections should have been slated for a later period and that too should have been followed by a wide-ranging consultation in place of that with only a few, as the latter may create further alienation. People were found feeling disturbed on the announcement of elections before completing negotiations with the militants. Recent round of talks with some militant leaders and offer of more talks of similar nature were dismissed by the people and leaders alike on the ground of lack of insincerity in the offer. The front-liners said that though it is deplorable that the talk is being held with the middle rung of leadership and not with them, it is good for the middle-level leadership to realise the real intent of the government.

These events have helped militant leaders to make people believe that the central government tries to get things done by fraudulent practices and it is not worth trusting. It is more concerned with the governance and control of the region than with welfare of the people. Moreover, Kashmir is seen more from a security point of view rather than anything else. The approach gives credence to the feeling that leaders and parties of the plains and the mainland are eager to rule the mountain state by proxy without understanding the culture and aspirations of the people. In fact, we need to have a fresh look at our policy and at the manner of administration in the border and mountainous states.

The Need for Constructive Work

From day one of our arrival in Jammu to being back to Delhi, we were confronted with the question of our affiliation. To our much discomfort and chagrin, we in the Jammu region were quite invariably associated with a Hindu fundamentalist organisation. In Srinagar, when we went to the residence of a slain human rights activists, we were taken in people's whisper as a human rights group. It is high time the Gandhians made their presence felt in the valley because the people of the valley have great expectations from the believers of nonviolence.

But some silent work by Gandhians is altogether not missing in the valley. They are working in good numbers in Jammu. The constructive work of Shri Gandhi Ashram in Srinagar, facing local medical college, deserves special mention. They were given threats on phone and a portion of the building was also bombed during the initial days of militancy under the misguided concept that they belonged to the government. The workers of Shri Gandhi Ashram, who deal in Khadi, responded by getting news published in the local newspapers about the nature of their work. Once it was clear that they were Gandhian workers engaged in providing work opportunities to the local people, the militants did not disturb them again. This shows that the Gandhian organisations without government support can play an important role in the valley. What is needed is our willingness to put in our time and effort on a regular basis.

Our journey which began with doubts and fear concluded with an improved understanding of the situation. Not many people from other parts of the country visit Kashmir. Systematic efforts should be made to encourage people to visit the valley. The widespread impression that the valley is not safe should be changed. Only by visiting, mixing, and talking to the people, and with a conscious endeavour, we can bring back the normal situation. This may be our greatest tribute to the peace-loving people of Kashmir, a land of rich cultural heritage without which India would be poorer indeed.

BRIEF NOTE ON RAMESH SHARMA

Ramesh Chand Sharma is the son of Laxmi Devi and Jai Narayan Shandilya and was born on May 5 .1950 Mandhana near Narnaul in Haryana.

He became involved with social work at an early age and, while at Delhi University, he became President of Gandhi Study Circle and the editor of "Atma Darpan" and "Yuva Kalyan" magazines.

He has been active in and has made significant contributions to : Tarun Shanti Sena , Youth Against Violence Campaign , Youth Against Famine, Drought Relief work, Relief work in Bihar, Bangladesh, Orissa, Uttarakhand Andhra Pradesh, Gujrat and the surrender of the Chambal Valley Dacoits.

He has also been involved with Bharat Jodo Campaign , Gram Kosh, Gram Swaraj and JPs Total Revolution Movement.

He has been very active in peace work and has campaigned in troubled areas like Assam, Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab. He has organized study centres, groups and camps on peace and nonviolence. He is the National Convenor of Gandhi Youth Fellowship. He worked to bring Relief to the Sikhs who had been victims of atrocities. He worked for Communal Harmony in Bhagalpur [Bihar] and Gujrat.

He has been closely associated with other Gandhian institutes and groups involved with Humanism, Democratic and spiritual values.

He organized and lead the "Tibet Yatra" to lend support to the Tibetans in exile.

Ramesh sharma has traveled widely in and outside India. He has visited USA, Canada, Mexico,. Thailand, Srilanka, Germany, Denmark, Pakistan, Nepal and several other countries:

He works with the Gandhi Peace Foundation in Delhi and plays a guiding role in the Foundation's Youth programmes. He co-ordinates the activity of TATVA PRACHAR Gandhi Peace Foundation Centres.

Books by Ramesh Sharma written in Hindi :-

Jag Uthi Tarunai, Sarhad Par Ki Khushboo, Gandhi Yuva Jan Milan, Gandhi Smirti Yatra, J&K - Arunodaya Jantar Hoga, Tibet Samarthan Yatra, Aao Milkar Gaye, America Bharman, Cycle Yatra, Rachanatmak Yuva Sammelan etc.

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