

Ever since the successful conduct of State assembly elections in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh (J&K), we have been following carefully the steps towards providing a “healing touch” being taken by Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed and his daughter Mehbooba Mufti. She has by all accounts played a key role in winning over a large section of the estranged Kashmiri population to vote for peace and good governance. At a time when leading male politicians got immobilised due to the fear of the gun, Mehbooba went from village to village to lend a sympathetic ear to people’s legitimate grievances, to intervene on their behalf and to give them a sense that someone cared about the pain and suffering of families victimised by the terrorist violence or brutalised by State agencies.

I spent three days in J&K with Mehbooba and Mufti Saheb in the last week of December. I accompanied them to Rajouri and Surankote in the Poonch sector where they went to offer their condolences and financial assistance to families who were victims of terrorist violence. At all three stops we made, it was an eye opening experience to see the huge numbers of people who came out to present their grievances to them with hope writ large on their faces. The results of this election have brought about a dramatic change in the political mood in J & K. For example, when Mehbooba and Mufti Saheb went to condole with the family of the PDP MLA who was recently murdered, the family insisted that their second son should be nominated to fight for the seat that fell vacant on account of the murder. They decided the seat should be occupied by a member of their family even though they had already lost their elder son in fighting the elections. None of the groups we met with raised any political slogans. Instead, people emphasised the need for employment

Appeal for Support

Towards a *Khush-haal* Kashmir

Our Contribution to a Healing Touch in J&K

○ Madhu Kishwar

in villages and towns where hordes of unemployed youth are clamouring for jobs. They also seemed desperate for improvement in roads, health centers, education and other civic necessities. Everywhere, the Chief Minister emphasised the need to defeat terrorism so that the government could focus more on development work. Nowhere was this message received with hostility or scepticism.

The political turmoil of the last decade and a half has not only led to a collapse of the tourism industry in Kashmir but there has been a severe breakdown of most service oriented institutions of the Central government such as post offices and banks. Mufti Saheb is trying hard to persuade the Central government to revitalise these institutions and create job opportunities for educated unemployed youth of J&K. He has also visited several metropolitan centres and addressed meetings of business chambers urging them to make some space for Kashmiri youth in the corporate sector and invited leading businessmen to invest in J&K.

Sharing Their Pain

Kashmir has a special place in the hearts of most Indians who cannot imagine the maps of India without J&K. And yet, very few of us have cared to pay heed to the suffering and anger of its people.

During the past thirteen years Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh have been drenched in blood. The air has constantly resounded with the roar of guns. Hidden underneath that roar are

the sounds of the sobs of the children who have not only been orphaned but also mutilated emotionally and physically. Some had parents killed in front of their eyes, their bodies lay in pools of blood, dead eyes open in shock and pain. These and other gruesome images appear and reappear in the children’s dreams. In them they see militants with guns, government soldiers with guns. The last decade and a half have wrecked innumerable families, witnessed the brutal murder and maiming of several thousand men, women and children, and rendered numerous women, children and old people destitute after the main bread winner of the family was killed or maimed for life. To quote: Rubia Sayeed “Whatever the label on those who carry the guns, the end result is the same. Many of these children and elderly remain in shock; many are destitute. It is hard to know if the orphans of militants are worse off when their fathers are alive but absent from the home, living on the fringes of society as outlaws, or when their fathers are dead. No one lends a helping hand to them, no one shows any compassion.”

Government Initiatives

The new coalition government led by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed of People’s Democratic Party (PDP) seems to be trying hard to heal the wounds and bridge the communal divide that mars the social and political fabric of J&K. There are very few politicians today who are willing to take the risks that Mufti Mohammad Sayeed is taking in braving the terrorist guns in an effort

to restore democracy and peace with dignity in J&K. Even more important, the Chief Minister is trying hard to build a national consensus on how to resolve the impasse on J&K. He is soliciting the cooperation of all political parties in these difficult and sensitive effort. Though Mehbooba Mufti, the CMs his daughter was very deserving of a cabinet berth, she has chosen to stay out just so that she can focus more on her live personal contact with people and attend to their problems and grievances without a whole army of officials acting as a barrier between her and the people, as inevitably happens when a person takes charge of a ministry.

The country owes a debt of gratitude to the people of J&K for having put in power a politician who is sincerely trying to rejuvenate the economy of the State and also pay close attention to the problems of his people. One of the important electoral promises the PDP made to the people of J&K is that they would try to help rehabilitate families who have been wrecked as a fallout of terrorist violence. The new State government is currently offering Rs 1 lakh as compensation to the families of those killed by terrorists or those who are hapless victims of the operations carried out by security agencies.

This is an important gesture but not enough to rehabilitate shattered families. More important, there is a backlog of thousands of families whose lives were devastated before the new government initiated their “healing touch” policy.

Political Solution Primary

The most important task has to be performed at the political level. One successful election should not make us complacent. The Pak-inspired terrorist violence can only be countered if the Central Government makes steadfast efforts to bring about an honourable

settlement of the Kashmir issue, ensures that innocent people are not brutalised in the name of curbing terrorism and puts a determined end to further human rights abuses by making the security agencies more professional and less ham-handed in their conduct.

We as citizens must find appropriate mechanisms to urge the government as well as the leaders of political parties not to let partisan considerations come in the way of determined efforts to restore peace and democracy in J&K.

Help in Healing Wounds

However, the task of healing the wounds of such families in particular, and the Kashmiri people in general cannot be performed by the government alone – no matter how well-meaning. If we want the people of J&K to feel an integral part of India, they must experience the care and concern of their fellow-citizens. While a long term political solution may take a while to materialise, in the interim, generous help will ease some of the pain and may hasten the healing process. We need to show through concrete gestures that we share their pain and appreciate their legitimate grievances, if the level of estrangement due to misunderstanding is to be brought down and if we want to contribute to creating the preconditions for enduring peace in Kashmir. Towards this end, we are working closely with Mehbooba Mufti to work out a comprehensive plan of action. The UMEED TRUST she is setting up in collaboration with MANUSHI aims to achieve the following :

- Lessen the emotional and political divides that have grown between various religious communities and regional groups in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh.
- Provide assistance to families victimised by terrorist or state violence and border shelling, especially children and women left in vulnerable circumstances due to the death or

disappearance of the main breadwinners in their families.

- Provide legal aid to those who have been implicated in false cases.
- Help in the rehabilitation of rape victims as well as those maimed or handicapped for life due to torture by terrorists or security agencies.
- Promote educational and cultural activities that will help cultivate respect for human rights and women’s rights and strengthen democratic institutions and values.
- Explore and make available new employment opportunities for those without jobs and provide other adequate sources of regular income.
- Widen the horizon of young people in J&K by arranging for group visits of young people to other places in India in cooperation with local organisations who will arrange for their stay with local families.
- Undertake research and investigations on ways to bring dynamism into the economy of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh and bring about a balanced and mutually beneficial economic partnership among different regions in J&K.
- Promote special programmes for the economic and social development of backward and disadvantaged communities.
- Provide a non-partisan forum for discussion and debate on important issues and challenges faced by the people, and explore peaceful means and strategies for conflict resolution in the State.
- Build bridges of communication and understanding between the people of J & K and the rest of India.
- Provide legal aid to poor and vulnerable families and initiate public interest litigation aimed towards necessary legal reform to strengthen democratic rights in the State.
- Help build effective institutions for promoting education and providing adequate health care

facilities for vulnerable groups in neglected areas.

- Promote a culture of social equality with a special focus on gender equality and bring about necessary reforms in all those laws that discriminate against any person or group on account of their gender, religion, caste or regional identity.
- Provide a forum for consideration of the changes required in the familial, cultural, social, political and economic functioning of society that would substantially eliminate the exploitation of women, minorities, the poor and other disadvantaged groups.
- Explore ways in which people concerned with expanding the horizons of individual freedom can work towards democratising the decision-making processes within their communities.
- Encourage and support closer cooperation among individuals and groups working for human rights, especially those who make a major effort to expand women's rights.
- Encourage inquiries that will counter the distortion of our past heritage to improve our understanding

of contemporary society with its rich cultural and social diversity.

- Explore ways to facilitate the dialogue among the diverse groups in J&K toward peaceful settlement of their disputes.

Support for Destitute Children

As a first modest step in this direction: we have committed ourselves to raise funds to support the education and pay for other essential needs of as many children as possible of families who have lost their earning member due to violence and are left without a source of income. The beneficiaries will include Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. We must try to help them, find a place for them, integrate them into the larger society. Investing in these children will also be investing in the future. Let's start with their education and help them get a fresh and hopeful perspective on their life, help keep them from sinking into despair. The careful screening of deserving families will be carried out by Mehbooba Mufti and her team. We would like to pay a monthly sum of Rs 500 per month for as many of these children as we can support.

One year's support for one child will come to Rs 6000.

In order that this help reaches as large a number of families as possible, at the moment we will support only one child per family, spread across as many villages and towns as possible.

We appeal to MANUSHI readers and friends to join us in this effort and contribute generously to this fund .

Other ways you can help:

- 1) If you are in the corporate sector or own a private business, make an effort to recruit people from J&K in your institution.
- 3) If you are in charge of a government or private institution, provide space for a Kashmir Food Corner and a handicraft cum dry-fruit stall in your institution. The Kashmiri saffron *kehva* is a far healthier drink than the coffee and cola drinks being sold all over India in public spaces and institutions. Kashmir also produces very special bakery items – breads and cookies. Such a chain of Kashmir Food Corners could provide employment to thousands of young men and women desperate for jobs, in addition to strengthening their emotional and cultural links with the rest of India. □

MANUSHI-UMEED Initiative for *Khush-haal* Kashmir

1) I would like to contribute:

Rs.....as lumpsum for the education of children of families wrecked by terrorism related violence.

Rs.....per month/per year towards the education of one/two/.....children in J&K.

2) I would like to provide space for a **Kashmir Food Corner** in my institution / neighbourhood.

3) I would like to provide employment to.....Kashmir youth in my organisation.

Name

Address.....

Email & Phone Number.....

All cheques to be sent in the name of MANUSHI TRUST at the following address: C 1/3 Sangam Estate, 1 Under Hill Road, Civil Lines, Delhi 110054
For further information write to manushi@nda.vsnl.net.in

Note: As usual, we will provide detailed accounting of all expenditures and the list of beneficiaries of MANUSHI-UMEED Fund. The names and addresses of all the children who get chosen for support will be published in MANUSHI.

Call for Papers

IAHR Regional Conference

Theme: Religions in the Indic Civilisation

December 18 - 21, 2003, New Delhi, India

Organised by

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi

in collaboration with

India International Centre, New Delhi

Madhu Kishwar
Convenor

Dr. Ashis Nandy and Professor Robert Thurman
Co-chairs

This Conference aims to encourage rigorous secular studies of religious traditions in India: Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Buddhism, Ambedkar-Buddhism, the Bahai faith, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism including their various sects and branches. Panels, symposia and individual papers are welcome on themes that include, but are not limited to the following:

- Studies of traditional religious texts with a special focus on:**
 - Notions of the common or public good; norms about accumulating and sharing income and wealth;
 - Ideal forms of gender, generational, conjugal and familial relations;
 - Theories of kingship, justice and political authority;
 - Relations between the divine and mortals, rulers and ruled, nature and human beings.
- Interrelationships among religious dogmas, theologies, philosophies, folk beliefs, and actual practices; varying concepts of the canonical in religious traditions**
- Historical and contemporary studies of**
 - The growth or decay of syncretic traditions in religious texts, practices and norms;
 - The role and functions of dharmasthans, pilgrimage centres as well as the control and management of religious institutions;
 - The rise, decline and renewals of shramanic religious traditions within Indic civilisation
- The politics of religious conversion historically and/or in contemporary India; Limits of religious authority within specific systems of religious beliefs, norms, and practices for participants, dissenters and outsiders.**
- The historical and contemporary impact of the rise of nationalism on religious beliefs and practices, Gandhi's religion, and Hindu-Muslim relations in 20th Century Indic civilization.**
- Special methodological concerns in the study of religions within Indic civilization, and ways of approaching their resolution.**
- Contributions of Indic religions to cosmological speculation in 20th century science.**

Deadline Extended for Indian Scholars

We have received many requests from interested scholars in Indian Universities and research institutions for an extension of the deadline for submission of proposals from January 31 because they received information about this conference very late, and that too only through hearsay. We had sent posters to hundreds of academic institutions announcing the conference "Call for Papers". However, in a number of cases these posters were never put up. Hence the communication gap.

We regret very much that we failed to advertise our Conference through academic journals with a wide reach and relied mainly on wall posters and email postings. Even though the response to our conference is already overwhelming, we are extending the deadline for submission of panel/ paper proposals for Indian scholars to make amends for our lapse. Those sending proposals late, will be informed accordingly.

Extended Deadline for Submission of Proposals : March 10, 2003

For further clarifications and information write to:

Madhu Kishwar

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