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## My life's mission to win for India the people of Kashmir is lost irretrievably: Wajahat Habibullah

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BSF Jawans stand guard on the top of armoured vehicle during restrictions in Srinagar on August 23, 2016.  
Photo: Nissar Ahmad

*The surge of Kashmiri nationalism in the Valley could have been harnessed as social capital. But the recent orgy of violence has put paid to that hope. For any breakthrough to become possible in this situation, all the stakeholders, including the separatists, must agree on the return of peace while simultaneously engaging with the embittered young leadership emerging in the villages and towns of Kashmir, writes **Wajahat Habibullah**.*

And so the death of young people in Kashmir continues to rise as do the protests in ever-mounting violence. The killing of Burhan Wani on July 8 this year sparked acrimonious debates on TV channels.

Wani was described universally by India as a terrorist and by Pakistan as a martyr. The media, visual, social and print, resounded with argument and indignation. But by the 17th day of the curfew that covered all of Kashmir, there was a pall of silence cloaking the ferment, even though the death toll and injuries continued to mount. Among the earliest to be killed was Yasmina Wani, a resident of a suburb of Kulgam in south Kashmir, whose brother Amir

Hussain serves in the Border Security Force in Tripura. Yasmina was killed even as she was fleeing from the street into a side lane with her teenage brother whom she was dragging away from joining the protestors. By July 31, the 54th death had been recorded—Young Ishfaq Ahmed of Sopore in north Kashmir had a shattered skull, which, despite denials by the Superintendent of Police, himself a Kashmiri, the public believes was a result of beatings by the police.

It was only in March this year that I had travelled to South Kashmir on the invitation of the then popular Communist Party of India (Marxist) MLA, Yusuf Tarigami to address officials of Kulgam district. The subject was Right to Information and the meeting was held under the aegis of Dr. Syed Abid Rasheed Shah, an Indian Administrative Service officer, who is among a clutch of young Kashmiri officers who have qualified for and joined the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) with the express aim of serving their people through governance. The Right to Information Act (RTI) has captured the imagination of many a young Kashmiri, within the service and outside it. Significantly, Abid Rasheed Shah, whom I call Abid, is today the District Development Commissioner of Mehbooba Mufti's home district of Anantnag.

I drove to Kulgam and back in a taxi, unaccompanied by any security, and took a train ride to Baramulla on the shabby Srinagar-Baramulla train, lamenting the unplanned encroachment of palatial residences right into prime agricultural land, but at total peace. During this travel, I wandered unaccompanied through village and bazaar in Kulgam, Sopore, Anantnag and Baramulla, noting Kashmiris milling about or laughing and chattering in couples or small groups along a backstreet or a graveyard, in village and town and on the train compartment. Although I was scolded by young Abid for ignoring security, I had at least since 1982 never felt so much at peace in Kashmir. The July 8 killing and its aftermath put paid to that delusion. Today, as I move into the twilight years of my life, I go with the conviction that my life's mission to win for India the people of Kashmir is lost irretrievably.

In my own functioning as Commissioner of Kashmir Division, which covers all the districts of the Valley and the two districts of Ladakh, in turbulent 1990-93 and for years thereafter, I was the instrument of the Intelligence Bureau (IB), the Military Intelligence (MI), and indeed the Home Ministry, to sustain dialogue with all sections of the separatist leadership which had led the insurgency, and also with dissidents. One result of this was the peaceful resolution of the Hazratbal crisis of 1993; many of the militant players of that time are now in the political mainstream. In my official task of keeping law and order, I faced stoning and gunfire, unlike today when the most lethal attack on the security forces has been through grenade. I was a civilian officer never afraid to face my own people and I can be proud to claim today that not one of my countrymen suffered death or even injury under my orders.

Dr. Shah Faesal is another young Kashmiri who had joined the IAS after topping the All-India Civil Services examination. Currently Director of Education, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), he wrote in the *Indian Express* dated July 19, 2016 <sup>1</sup> : "Next day, I left for my office, incognito, wearing a kurta-pyjama and a farmer's cap, hopping across check posts like a thief, knowing well that if a group of enraged youngsters recognised me, I might be in trouble, and rightly so, for falling on the wrong side of the Kashmiri vs. Indian binary at such a critical juncture. Abusive comments on my Facebook <sup>2</sup> wall had the same refrain.

Ask teenagers in Srinagar and they will tell you how all these years India has been communicating to Kashmiris through rigged elections, dismissal of elected governments, through encounters and corruption. They will tell you how India has become synonymous with a military bunker or a police vehicle or a ranting panellist on prime time television. Is this the idea of India which can win Kashmiri hearts?"

As India's media, official pronouncements and security elements joined in a cacophony, they seemed to confirm the warning of Shah Faesal, undoing the fragile bond that tied Kashmir to India, a land of freedom and opportunity. No Kashmiri, not even Shah Faesal, today looks upon India in terms of that image—an image on the strength of which I and several like me had laboured to build a relationship of which Kashmiris would be proud to be part. Many are the youth who have ventured from Kashmir to build careers in Bengaluru and abroad.

I have mentioned how India describes Burhan Wani. Every Kashmiri refers to him as *shaheed*. There are elements even within the leadership in the ruling party of Kashmir that have sought enquiry into the killing. There has been argument as to whether he was indeed targeted by the Special Operations Group (SOG). But here is what an informed Kashmiri, Shujaat Bukhari, has to say in *Frontline*: “On July 8, a party of the SOG of the Jammu and Kashmir Police acted on a tip-off and reached Kokernag in South Kashmir to zero in on a house where Burhan Wani was spending time with two of his associates following Eid. The information was so correct that the party faced no difficulty in identifying the house and straightaway went to challenge the trio. According to the police, there was an encounter and by evening it was clear that Burhan, who had been giving the security establishment sleepless nights, was no more... The simmering discontent made it clear that Kashmir was heading for bad days after a peaceful Eid celebration. The government seems to have underestimated the spark that Burhan could ignite. Intelligence and administrative “gurus” had dismissed him as another militant commander and denied the potential of the aura they had themselves built around him... <sup>3</sup>”.

Kokernag where Burhan was killed is a vale of apple orchards and walnut in South Kashmir. It was here that the young, technically savvy entrepreneur Khurram Mir, 34, was developing his orchard with improved variety and saplings with graft and transplant, drawing from state of the art technology based on his own painstaking research. Locals will tell you that the residents who knew of Burhan's presence were pacified by the police to believe that the accretion of security presence in the vicinity on July 8 was because Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti was due to visit Khurram's orchard. This perceived deception is said to have sparked the massive protests in a cycle of violence and counter-violence by the state. Another Kashmiri writer Wajahat Qazi describes on Facebook how on the 18th day, when the government relaxed the curfew, there appeared to be no change in the momentum and drift of protests; young boys took over the streets of Srinagar and other areas and essentially commanded these public spaces. This situation has only worsened thereafter with a militant attack on a CRPF camp in Nowhatta on August 16, killing the Commanding Officer, followed by police firing in Batmaloo leading to the loss of civilian life. Qazi asks that given the impasse that defines the politics of the vale temporarily, what likely outcomes will prevail there.

Much has been discussed and written on the Instrument of J&K's Accession to India in 1947 and UN resolutions of 1948. But the undisputable fact is that, despite differences, common Kashmiris, and I refer specifically to the residents of today's troubled Valley, placed their trust unquestioningly in Sheikh Abdullah, their father figure and unchallenged leader who in the face of a violent tribal intrusion backed by the Pakistan army, saw India as Kashmir's hope. That makes Kashmir the only major princely state that acceded to India by the will of its people. And India had stood true to her history of giving refuge to the oppressed, be they Jew or Parsee, through the ages. It matters little what the niceties of the Instrument of Accession were. The question is, do the Kashmiris look upon themselves as Indians as do Malayalis, Bengalis, Gujaratis or Punjabis? Today's new generation of young Kashmiris represented by Shah Faesal, Syed Abid Rasheed Shah, Khurram Mir, are all modern, well educated, consummate in social media skills and brought up in an environment steeped in violence. Burhan Wani too was part of this generation. Each of them chose a path by which they felt they could serve their people best. Many had returned to Kashmir from comfortable occupation or business in the hope of promised opportunity. And post-conflict, this urge describes well the surge of Kashmiri nationalism that grips young Kashmiris today. This surge

could have been social capital for India as indeed it has been to an extent, as can be seen from the examples I cite. Such sub-nationalisms are the moorings of the triumph of India as a nation across the country. In Kashmir too this inclusion was attempted with the entry in 1975 of the nationalist Plebiscite Front, the reincarnated National Conference, still under its charismatic Baba-i-Qaum. Was it then an impossibility, grounded as it would have been in undeniable fact, that the future of Kashmir held promise only as part of India, which is both a nation and an idea? But this attempt foundered on the shoals of the uprising of 1990. And its death is illustrated eloquently by the incineration of Khurram's orchard, which could have stood as a symbol of Kashmir's hope in the future, but which was burned down by angry Kashmiris in reaction to the Burhan killing. And it is too easy for us to shirk responsibility by simply blaming Pakistan.

There is little doubt that Pakistan has taken advantage, even exacerbated our discomfiture with every means at its command. Today masked hoodlums roam rural Kashmir seeking recruits to their cause, as security forces focus on enforcing curfews in towns, and the poseurs in Pakistan's leadership mock India with a brazen invitation to our government to discuss Kashmir. But did we have any reason to doubt that Pakistan would do as it is doing, even after its violent birth and the wars that followed? Why then has Kashmir been allowed to become our Achilles' Heel? The events that followed the Accession, the policies pursued, and, most of all, the way the relationship between Kashmiris and other Indians evolved, ensured that Kashmiris might accept and even develop affection for some sections of India, but will never consider themselves Indian. And although much of the Kashmiri leadership, including the separatists, are chary of Pakistan, this fear has not translated into an awareness of their Indianness but has instead led to their seeking to play one country against the other, and accepting support from both. And why is it that the deaths in Kashmir, the blinding of more than 100 children are never referred to in media or drawing room as the death and injury of Indians? One must be thankful that the Prime Minister has now given a call to the nation to look upon the mortalities in Kashmir, of soldier, policeman or agitating youth as all being of people of our own.

My life's endeavour to reach out as an Indian to my fellows in Kashmir now lies washed up in the detritus of the insurgency. Make no mistake—that insurgency has failed. This owes much to the dextrous strategy of the Indian military in seeking support from within to throttle infiltration and annihilate the militant bases along the borders that had mushroomed in the '90s. Nothing illustrates this better than the marginalisation of the separatist leadership which is today left scrambling for a leadership role.

But my foreboding for the next phase of the relationship of Kashmiris with India is even graver, for we have lost Kashmir's youth: Educated, talented but consumed with hatred, they will be the ones leading the State into its future. It is this section of the Kashmiris that we must engage with if India is to be the arbiter of the future. So, while the establishment, including the separatist leadership, must agree on the need to restore peace, on which there is already a consensus, all these stakeholders must engage with the newly emerging leadership in village and town to agree on the need for dialogue to resolve conflict, a consensus that had been arrived at by the opening of the century, but has now been grievously dispelled.

The thinking of today's young Kashmiris has been voiced succinctly in a Scroll.in interview given by Burhan Wani's father, Muzaffar, who as principal of a government school has been part of the state government with no militant inclinations of his own, "Yes, 10-12-year-old children are participating more in these protests. The difference is that our generation was a little cowardly. We had seen peace and were afraid of the gun when it appeared. But today's children have been born in the era of the gun and they have heard gunshots and seen piles of bodies since childhood—they have seen orphans, their mothers getting widowed. This goes on in their minds: "What is happening?" These are innocent children, they have not done anything wrong or committed a crime and yet these

atrocities are committed on them. Look at how many children lost their eyes, legs or hands. How many fathers got killed, and mothers injured. The children cannot tolerate this because their power of tolerance is lower and this is why they participate [more in the protests]”.

#### Endnotes:

1. <sup>△</sup> Faesal, Shah, 2016. "[Every hour of prime time TV news aggression pushes Kashmir a mile westward from India](#)", *The Indian Express*, July 20. Last accessed August 29, 2016.
2. <sup>△</sup> *The Indian Express*, 2016. "[Facebook](#)". Last accessed August 29, 2016.
3. <sup>△</sup> Shujaat Bukhari, 2016. "[Valley of fire](#)", *The Frontline*, August 5.

A shorter version of this article had appeared in *The Hindu* (A season of loss in Kashmir) on August 8, 2016.

*(Wajahat Habibullah a former civil servant from the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) batch of 1968 is from an old Lucknow family. He has spent much of his career in Jammu and Kashmir, most of it in the Kashmir Valley. He has also served on the staff of two Indian Prime Ministers—Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi as Director and Joint Secretary respectively— and was administrator of the Union Territory of Lakshadweep, and held the post of Minister in the Embassy of India, Washington DC, U.S., and Director, Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration. Subsequently, he was Secretary in the Department of Consumer Affairs, and in the Ministries of Textiles and Panchayati Raj. After retiring from the service Habibullah served as India's first Chief Information Commissioner- heading the final court of appeal under India's Right to Information Act- and Chairman, National Commission for Minorities. A former Randolph Jennings fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, Habibullah has been awarded the Rajiv Gandhi Award for Excellence in Secularism. He is a member of the Broadcast Contents Complaints Council, India. He is the author of 'My Kashmir: The Dying of the Light'.)*

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