



**THE HINDU CENTRE**

for

Politics and Public Policy

Interview

## No Consistency in Delhi's Approach to Kashmir: A.S. Dulat

Saptarshi Bhattacharya and Vasundhara Sirnate

Feb 23, 2016



Former R&AW chief A.S. Dulat. File Photo: M. Vedhan

*Kashmir remains India's unsolved puzzle even after six decades. Its history has thrown up strange paradoxes and challenges for policy makers in New Delhi. In *Kashmir: The Vajpayee Years*, which he co-authored, **Amarjit Singh Dulat**, who headed India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), between 1999 and 2000, and was Special Advisor on Kashmir to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, delves into these paradoxes and attempts to unravel the Kashmiri mindset. He tells **Saptarshi Bhattacharya** and **Vasundhara Sirnate** that Kashmir is a complex problem, for which the solution lies in dialogue and political will. Excerpts from an interview held in January, in Chennai, during *The Hindu Lit for Life*, 2016:*

**Saptarshi Bhattacharya:** In your book *Kashmir: The Vajpayee Years*, [co-authored with Aditya Sinha] you talk about your long association with Kashmir as a senior intelligence officer. Could you give us a peek into the Kashmiri mind, the Kashmiri psyche?

**A.S. Dulat:** You see it is a very, very complex psyche. I have mentioned in the book that you may need ten lifetimes to understand Kashmir and the Kashmiri. Over a period of time one has learnt that the most glaring thing, and the saddest part, is that the Kashmiri doesn't trust you. He presumes, at the starting point, that you are lying and, therefore, he has to also lie. Otherwise, it will be an uneven discussion or an uneven contest. That is the sad part. And, the reason for that is because he believes that Delhi has always lied to him.

Now, to give you an instance — again a very sad commentary — when Dr. Farooq Abdullah — and he said it many times; he said it to me and I said it in my book — was a Cabinet Minister in the UPA [United Progressive Alliance] government, he gave an interview to [journalist] Saeed Naqvi. At the end when Saeed asked him, “Doctor, what is the problem in Kashmir?” He said, “Sadly, Delhi does not trust us.” Now, if Farooq Abdullah, as a Cabinet Minister — forget that he is Sheikh sahab's son and the Abdullachs have a huge legacy and contribution to Kashmir — is feeling this, then something is wrong. That is the one thing that comes out repeatedly.

The second thing is that the Kashmiri is very smart. He is much smarter than the average Indian. He is very politically savvy as well. You will be surprised how much they know not only of what's happening in Chennai but also all over the world. They keep themselves abreast. They are very street smart.

The other great quality of a Kashmiri is his adaptability. If you threaten him, he will lie down; might even pretend that he is dead or going to die, and, given a chance, he will rise again. I think it springs out of years and years of foreign rule and domination. As you know, Kashmir has been ruled by the Mughals, the Afghans, the Sikhs, the Dogras, and so on. So, there is this feeling of exaggerated oppression and of not being free enough, and that has, sort of, played on this complex psyche that they are always discriminated [against], they are not given their due.

**SB: A victimhood narrative kind of a thing...**

That's right. Victimhood. And they play it well. The Kashmiri, if you get to know him, will be nice, gentle. Many Indians who go to Kashmir are actually surprised because they perceive hostility: 'it's a Muslim State, there is terrorism, there is violence'. They are surprised at the kind of kindness that they receive. I am not talking so much about the hospitality but the kindness that you see in Kashmir. That's the other side of the coin, but there is also this side that is tricky. He tends to be devious because he feels to survive it is the only way. 'If I speak the truth, I won't be believed in any case. I have had it then.' The other thing is that one-to-one they will admit to so much. But [not] if you sit down in a group, [*shakes his head saying no*], because one Kashmiri does not trust the other. If they don't trust you, they trust each other even less. So, this is all part of the mental make-up of a Kashmiri.

**SB: What has been Delhi's attitude towards Kashmir?**

Mostly, we tend to distrust. Again, it is a very sad story. Let's go back to 1947 and what happened thereafter, after the accession. They had Sheikh sahab, he was a personal friend of Pandit Nehru, and he said repeatedly — he



was on record and he wrote to Pandit Nehru also — that the reason that they opted for India rather than their core religion is because of two great personalities that they trusted, the Mahatma and Panditji. And then what happens? We reach an agreement in 1952 for autonomy and in 1953, sadly, you arrest the Sheikh for whatever reasons. It's a sad story, and since 1953, things have not gone well for us.

In fact, a very interesting thing that I think I have written in the book [is] about a meeting between Rajaji [India's first Governor General, C. Rajagopalachari] and Mr. [B. N.] Malik, who is also considered hawkish. Rajaji was briefly Home Minister after Sardar Patel, but left because of differences with Panditji and preferred to be the Chief Minister here [Madras State]. At the meeting, Rajaji asked Malik, "Why did you need to close the door on the Sheikh? Surely, there were other options. Now, Kashmir will always remain disturbed." This is what Rajaji said. Those are prophetic words. This is exactly what has happened over the years. That was Delhi's attitude. There is no consistency. It's up and down, up and down.

“*There have been very few Prime Ministers who have shown constant interest or focus on Kashmir*”

Let me put it like this, there have been very few Prime Ministers who have shown constant interest or focus on Kashmir. Pandit Nehru, of course, because he felt so strongly about Kashmir. Mrs. Gandhi did, and she had her own whims and fancies. She was instrumental [in] Farooq succeeding the Sheikh; she facilitated the process. She wanted Farooq and yet she removed him in two years. Again, that was a huge blunder. Ask any Kashmiri and he will tell you that those two years — a year-and-a-half, or whatever Farooq Abdullah got in his first term — were the best of Farooq because he was his own man. You see, 1984 taught Farooq Abdullah a big lesson, and that lesson was that *nahi chalega* [it won't work]. 'I have to stay on the right side of Delhi, I have to compromise with them.' The word compromise then encompasses so much, because if you compromise on one side, you got to make up somewhere on the other side. Therefore, people say in Kashmir that Farooq has never been the same after that, and he has been referred to as a 'stooge of Delhi', as an 'agent of Delhi', that 'the Abdullahs want power more than anything else'.

Yet, if you ask me, not because I like the man, however dispassionate I believe I would like to be, he is by far the tallest leader in Kashmir. He is close to 80 now. I think Mufti was about six months or so older. Farooq was a leader. After Sheikh Sahab, he brought in Bakshi Ghulam Mahmood, he managed well. Under the circumstances, he did his bit. People say he was a good administrator. There were lots of frauds also. Farooq in a State that has been devoid of leadership offered so much and we have wasted him.

Not only [as] a Chief Minister, he would have made an excellent Union Minister. I think he would have made a good external affairs minister. If not that, I think he would have made a good civil aviation or tourism minister. I think he would have made an excellent governor in a State like Maharashtra, which has Bollywood. He would have made an excellent ambassador to a country like France. Nothing happened. And when you made him a minister in UPA II, you didn't swear him in the first time. So he went off to South Africa to watch cricket. Then you called him back, gave him Cabinet rank, and what did you give him? In Kashmir, they used to say gober gas [cow-dung gas] minister. It is demeaning. He had so much to offer for India and for Kashmir. All gone waste. He is old now.

**SB: We have also lost a leader like Mufti now.**

**“** *We used to be called insects of the gutter, gandi naali ke keede, by Sheikh sahab. Now, we are a regional party in our own right* **”**

Yes. Sadly, Mufti sahab is gone. Whatever it is, I rate Farooq much above Mufti, but Mufti was a good man. He was a wise man. He was a balanced sort of a player, a careful player. He couldn't match Farooq's flamboyance but he stuck in there, he fought it out. And he had the imagination, the realism to realise he would never become Chief Minister in the Congress. Therefore, he created his own regional party. The year before last, in May, during the parliamentary elections, it looked as if they were winning all three parliamentary seats in the valley, which is incredible. Mufti sahab was riding high. And he said to me, "We used to be called insects of the gutter, *gandi naali ke keede*, by Sheikh sahab. Now, we are a regional party in our own right." I said to him, "Of course you are, sir." In fact, I said to him, "Now you don't even need to campaign for the Assembly elections." But again, the Assembly elections produced results that satisfied nobody.

**SB: Do you think much of the reason for the results goes to the Amarnath land row?**

I won't attribute that to the Amarnath row. It is just that the mood in Kashmir is very difficult to [predict], as I was explaining; it can change overnight. It is like that. We don't know what's going to affect what. The PDP was hoping for 35 seats in a House of 87. Some of them even talked of 40 or 45; I even heard the figure 45. I said, "I think you guys are exaggerating it a bit." And he got 28. And the BJP was close behind with 25. They [BJP] were dreaming of 44 as well. They did not get a single seat in the valley, which again sends a signal. So, this coalition is the only thing that could have happened.

**“** *It was a coalition of compulsions, but if both sides had imagined it properly, it was also a great coalition. It gave a great opportunity for ending this extreme polarisation, which, as you rightly mentioned, goes back to 2008 and got accentuated in the 2014 elections* **”**

It was a coalition of compulsions, but if both sides had imagined it properly, it was also a great coalition. It gave a great opportunity for ending this extreme polarisation, which, as you rightly mentioned, goes back to 2008 and got accentuated in the 2014 elections. Here you have a coalition between Srinagar and Jammu, and Mufti sahab used to call it North Pole and South Pole. It [election] could have brought them together. It hasn't; it has done nothing of that sort, and in the bargain, both parties have lost out in their constituencies.

If an election is held today in Kashmir, the PDP will come down from 28 to may be 18, and the BJP will lose half their seats in Jammu. Both constituencies are angry, which brings me to the often-asked question of Article 370. Before you ask me, let me pre-empt you.

The BJP kept harping on removing Article 370. You see, Article 370 is only symbolic now. Those people who ask for the removal of Article 370 don't even understand the implications, because there is nothing left in it. As I have said in the book, it is only a fig leaf. Why do you want to deprive the Kashmiri of that fig leaf? In the Kashmiri mind, the ultimate nightmare is that 'Delhi is conspiring to reduce us to a minority in our own homeland, and then we won't know where to go except Pakistan'. They never talk about it but they whisper it to each other; if you get to know them well enough and you sit down on the floor to eat out of the same *trami*, they will tell you. That's the ultimate Kashmiri nightmare. Now, why would we want to do these things? Does it make any sense?

**SB: One thing is about explaining their alliance to their constituencies, the other is about performance...**

“*I think this is Mehbooba's great dilemma. She knows what has happened. She knows how much her father has been cursed in the valley. She knows how much the PDP has lost. Therefore, she doesn't know whether she wants to continue in the demolition of the PDP or whether she can devise something else. That is the ultimate dilemma*”

I think this is Mehbooba's great dilemma. She knows what has happened. She knows how much her father has been cursed in the valley. She knows how much the PDP has lost. Therefore, she doesn't know whether she wants to continue in the demolition of the PDP or whether she can devise something else. That is the ultimate dilemma. It is not so much the BJP or the Congress or the National Conference. She is in quite a jam. She is a smart cookie, and she is not as pliable as Mufti sahab might have been, or as accommodative as he might have been. Mufti sahab, surprisingly, towards the end — I used to always think that he is quite narrow minded — was so broad-minded as to suggest that Modi has bigger problems than we have and, therefore, we need to understand his problems and India's problems. He knew that Modiji's problem was Hindutva.

**SB: This raises the question, is religion so intrinsic to the problem in Kashmir today?**

It is, it is. Actually, it has always been an issue, which was never talked about. Now, depending on how Delhi deals with it, it can lie buried or it can also suddenly come to life. Like, in recent years, we have been talking of radicalism in Kashmir. There is some radicalism. Some of the younger kids are influenced by these extreme ideas, but by and large, I think the Kashmiri is still different.

Kashmiri Islam is very different from even Indian Islam. I believe that Indian Islam is the most moderate, reasonable, benign Islam that we have. Kashmiris, as you know, are all converts and they have descended from Saraswat Brahmins. So, there is still that belief in the rishi munis and Sufis. So, that brings us to *Kashmiriyat*, which is really the binding force. Now, people say that *Kashmiriyat* actually exists — the question that Nandita Haksar has raised in her book: *Is Kashmiriyat a myth or reality?* And the protagonist in her book, Sampat Prakash, insists, even today living in Jammu, that *Kashmiriyat* exists. In fact, if you read her book, it is quite fascinating. As you know she is a human rights lawyer and she represented [S.A.R.] Geelani who she got acquitted in the Parliament attack case. She also persuaded Sampat Prakash — whom she did not know and was introduced to him — to be a witness in that case. That got Geelani acquitted. So, here is *Kashmiriyat*.

A Kashmiri Pandit, exiled from his own land, yet willing to help a Muslim involved in or blamed for the attack on Parliament. Isn't that fascinating? I'm only saying this. But, yes. There is religion. Now, since we brought up religion, the question that is often asked is: 'Would a Kashmiri want to go to Pakistan, do they want Pakistan?' Not at all, *[emphasis]* not at all.

The Kashmiri is very smart. Well, there are a lot of things that should disturb us, but there are two realisations. One is that Kashmir is going nowhere. India is far too big, far too powerful. India is never going to let go of Kashmir, and Pakistan is no comparison for the conditions in the two countries. At the same time, the Kashmiri will remind you that you don't take Pakistan lightly. They also have an army and you have not been able to defeat that army anywhere, excepting Bangladesh.

*“ We get very excited if these ISIS flags and the Pakistani flags come up. It doesn't mean that suddenly all of Srinagar wants to go to Pakistan. It is just a sign of anger and frustration that comes up. And, as I have also mentioned in my book, Pakistan is a very convenient fall-back position for the Kashmiri ”*

We get very excited if these ISIS flags and the Pakistani flags come up. It doesn't mean that suddenly all of Srinagar wants to go to Pakistan. It is just a sign of anger and frustration that comes up. And, as I have also mentioned in my book, Pakistan is a very convenient fall-back position for the Kashmiri. But, in his heart of hearts and genuinely, he wants nothing more than peace between India and Pakistan, because the Kashmiri feels that that is the only thing that will give him some respite. They are squeezed between India and Pakistan, these two mighty powers, and between the ISI and the R&AW, if you like.

**SB: I wanted to ask you this question, which you have answered succinctly already, about the colour of the flags in Kashmir. You have the red-and-white, which is the State flag, you have green and you have black. From what you said, the colour remains to be red-and-white by and large, right?**

Yes, it is. But you know, having said that, [the colour of] all the militant outfits and the PDP flag is green.

**SB: You have mentioned in your book about Kashmir's favourite colour being grey. Here do we see a toss-up between the different colours?**

No. the Kashmiri's favourite colour will always be grey because he doesn't want you to know what he is thinking. Farooq is the quintessential Kashmiri. And like every Kashmiri, he makes it very evident, very clear: 'Don't you dare take me for granted.' And that is exactly what every Kashmiri feels.

Coming back to Farooq, that is the reason Delhi has not understood Farooq Abdullah, because he will not allow you to understand him easily. You have to work on him to understand him. People say 'he is frivolous', 'he is unreliable', 'he is untrustworthy'. All humbug, rubbish. Farooq is a smart politician. He is one of the finest orators in the country. And he can speak various languages. He can even sing in different languages. He can sing ghazals, he can sing Bollywood music and he can sing *bhajans*. Isn't that amazing, the versatility of the man?

**Vasundhara Sirnate: I want to ask you about the Islamic radicalisation process in Kashmir. In 2014, I was interviewing people in the army about various aspects of the counterinsurgency operations and one of the regimental commanding officers of one of the RR regiments did say that one of their huge concerns was about the current Islamic radicalisation.**

I am not an Islam expert but let me concede that it is an issue of anxiety, that there is more and more radicalism, but I don't really think that religion as such is a problem in Kashmir. No, not at all. Not at all.

For example, you take the Shias. There is considerable Shia population here and there in pockets. Parts of Srinagar, Badgaon districts [there are] a lot of Shias; go further north [to] Baramullah, there are pockets of Shia [population]. And even the Shias feel, when you talk to them personally, that they are second-rate citizens. Although we do not have any serious sectarian problem in Kashmir, there is a religious differentiation, and it surfaces at times during Muharram. In fact, it is quite interesting, nobody notices this and I put that picture on the cover of my book for two reasons.

One, to send a message to Modiji that your great leader [Atal Behari Vajpayee] is here shaking hands with [the] Hurriyat. And, you today say that you will not talk to the Hurriyat. Two, interestingly or coincidentally, at that point of time, if you see the person he is shaking hands with, Maulvi Abbas, who was then the president, was a Shia. He was the chairman for a very short period and Pakistan didn't like him. But he still was chairman. It is again the coincidence.

**VS: Another thing that jumps out from the 2014 interviews, after the flood and before the election, is that people wanted a leader who could keep them safe from the excesses of the army. People were saying that the J&K police are worse than the army.**

J&K police is the most maligned at this point of time. You see, what is happening is that when excesses go unnoticed by whoever, then it transforms itself into a business. As I have said very often and for many years now, everybody has developed a vested interest in the *status quo* in Kashmir. Everybody — politicians, separatists, militants, the administration, the security forces and the army. The army is sitting there, ruling the roost. I don't think that the army is committing too many excesses now, I have not heard of army excesses. But the Kashmiris feel that [they] are an occupied people. It [army] is an occupation force. So Omar Abdullah, when he said 'let's remove AFSPA from a district and a half', and when there was still resistance, he said, 'Give me a chance. Let's try it. If it doesn't work, we will reinforce it.' Chidambaram supported it. It still didn't happen. Now, there is even less chance of it happening. We have this fixed mind in Delhi, sorry to say, there's a frozen mindset, with very thick blinkers. So nothing will change.

**VS: About AFSPA, obviously there are stakeholders — the army, when these inquiries are conducted, says 'it is much harder to operate without AFSPA. So, we want it or we can't do our operations'. Wouldn't it make sense to remove at least...**

You see, if you put me in charge of anything, like I was the R&AW chief, I would like to be the R&AW chief with the powers of the ISI — unfettered, fully autonomous. Who doesn't want that? And, over a period of time, that grows. The army has been there for so many years. People have forgotten? It is 25 years or so.

**VS: Would it make sense that if you can't get rid of it in one go, then ...**

That's what Omar said. 'Just give me relief for a district and a half. I want the army out of Srinagar and Badgaon, which is such a small little [place].'

**VS: My propositions are a bit different. I was saying why don't we remove some clauses out of it, like the sexual violence thing, which creates the biggest furore in both Northeast and Kashmir.**

You see it is not really the clauses. It is about its significance. What does AFSPA mean? Like you said, you talked to people at the time of the 2014 elections and some people talked about development. Believe you me, there's nobody in the world who doesn't want development; there's nobody in the world who doesn't want progress.

Kashmir is not an economic issue. It's a political issue. More than political, it is an emotive issue, it's a psychological issue, the issue of the mind. We talk about winning the hearts and minds, we need to understand that Kashmiri mind and appreciate some of it, despite all its shortcomings. And, if I might extend that, because we talk about terrorism, we talk about ISIS and this and that, I think we need to understand the Indian Muslim mind also. Our Muslims are very good Muslims. They are not inclined that way, but please try and understand their problems.

**VS: Will the right-wing politics of Hindutva perhaps result in any type of Islamic radicalisation, if it were to happen?**

*“ We are a pluralistic society. Everybody must have an equal right in this country, it is everybody's country. I may or may not be a Hindu, he may or may not be a Christian or Muslim. But the issue is we are not a Hindu country ”*

I don't agree. You see, what the Muslims think of Hindutva, or what the people of Nagpur think of Muslims, that is a separate thing. It is a question of how you treat them. Like you were saying today, we are a pluralistic society. Everybody must have an equal right in this country. It is everybody's country. I may or may not be a Hindu, he may or may not be a Christian or Muslim. But the issue is we are not a Hindu country.

**SB: We spoke about Kashmir but one aspect we haven't touched upon is the relationship with Pakistan. In International Relations circles, there is a common theory that Pakistan means that you have the putative civilian government and you have the MJC — the Military-Jihadi Complex, which controls everything. Does India need to try and engage with the MJC in terms of bringing the countries together? Do you support any kind of engagement with them, may be at the intelligence level, R&AW and ISI?**

I have been saying this for years. It is like an old 78 rpm gramophone record where the needle used to get stuck. I don't know how many times I have said this that if you believe in the idea of engagement, then you need to clear the cobwebs of the mind. Engagement can become all encompassing. What have we to hide and what have they to hide? They have much more to hide than us. So, take it up. Are we weaker than them? Are we less intelligent than them?

India is such a big country. We say we are the third fastest developing economy. Look at the manpower. What is India lacking? But we behave like there is this big Pakistan *hawa*. And then what are your options? Now everybody has openly acknowledged, even [External Affairs Minister] Sushma Swaraj has said that war, *jung*, is not an option.



Then what is the option? If you tried beating up your wife in a bad relationship and even that hasn't worked because she won't take it, she would hit you back, then [what]? In this case, we can't apply for divorce either. So, doesn't it make sense to talk? That's why I just say that Vajpayee was a great man.

**SB: Do you think we also missed the bus during Musharraf's period?**

“*But when Dr. Manmohan Singh before demitting office says that we almost reached an agreement on Kashmir, that's a big thing. And if he could reach there, then why can't Modi? Especially after the birthday bash*”

We did, we did. In some ways, I think Dr. Manmohan Singh comes across as a rather tragic figure. Because he wanted it [engagement] more than anybody else and he was more earnest and honest about it than anybody else; not even Vajpayee. He couldn't do it. And he missed that great window of opportunity in 2006-2007. Then Musharraf lost power. Everybody knows his power. These things do not continue *ad infinitum*. But the thing is, and here is a lesson, I will not fully trust what [Khurshid Mahmud] Kasuri says. I may not even believe what Sati [Satinder] Lambah says. But when Dr. Manmohan Singh before demitting office says that we almost reached an agreement on Kashmir, that's a big thing. And, if he could reach there, then why can't Modi? Especially after the birthday bash. Mian sahab's birthday got spoilt by Pathankot. These things will happen.

**VS: Could Pathankot have been handled differently?**

[When] something happens, it happens. I have only one comment on Pathankot. We had a warning when Gurdaspur happened, and Punjab police is one of the better forces. They have dealt with all this. They deal with it in the toughest possible way. They knew exactly, or they would have known exactly, what happened in Dinanagar or Gurdaspur. Then, why did it happen again? There is a mix-up there somewhere, may be with the drug cartel or whatever it is. That is a route that has been used, it is of course known as the drug route, but it has been used in the past by the Sikh militants, it was the route that the Babbar Khalsa took. All that's well known.

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*This article was updated with editorial corrections on February 26, 2016.*