

Shehr-i-Khas to Shehr-i-Iflaas



Srinagar city is dying. But it must survive. What it needs is a comprehensive Social and Economic Revival Plan. Will parties like PDP & NC rise to the occasion? Will Mirwaiz Umar and Yasin Malik do their bits?



DATELINE SRINAGAR

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Srinagar city – some 2000 years old – represents the spirit of Kashmir. From the symbol of this land's political, economic and intellectual life, Srinagar today is a picture of gloom, marginalisation and decay. The city's *Shehr-i-Khas* – the old Srinagar – in particular is little more than a historical monument today.

Historically, Srinagar has represented Kashmir's dominant aspiration for political justice and dignity. It has acted as the pivot. That pivot is being weakened. Politically, it has been systematically disempowered. Its economic marginalization is almost complete. Its social vibrancy is a thing of the past. But Srinagar must survive.

It is a tragedy that neither the National Conference – which claims to have its roots here – nor any other major political party actually ever came up with a development and economic vision for Srinagar. Such a vision was all the more important in the post-2000 context.

When we look closely, we realize that National Conference's politics in the city has narrowly hovered around 3 Ms of *malkhah*, mausoleums and malice (towards those who don't vote). Although PDP's tenure saw some of the best facelifts of Srinagar in recent decades, it fell short of expectations as well.

In the post 1989 period, Srinagar, particularly the *Shehr-i-Khas*, was devastated. Most business and commerce from the city shifted to Jammu city. Day-to-day strife and *hartals* made many of its inhabitants to shift elsewhere. That shift made many traditional economic activities of the city to shut down. Education suffered immensely. There was acute brain drain. Poverty deepened. Socialisation and recreation almost disappeared.

Parties like the Awami Action Committee and the JKLF – who have political stakes

in the city – had some responsibilities too. Even as they do not engage with the electoral political system, both these parties should have come up with some sort of Social and Economic Resilience Plans of their own for the city. Such plans should have sought to create possibilities of providing congenial work environments for the city's businesses and prevent the flight of economic activities from there.

What contributed to Srinagar's political disempowerment was the systematic demographic engineering as well – that served to transform the city from the most populous urban entity of the state to a secondary one. It is surprising that neither the National Conference nor the Awami Action Committee questioned and resisted that demographic engineering. Election boycotts and disassociation with administrative governance made things worse for the city.

Srinagar was once a hub of economic creativity and manufacturing in this region. Besides the thriving arts and crafts businesses, Srinagar had some prized productions – which if replicated in extended models could have done wonders to its economic development.

Its once-thriving fabric weaving, silk cloth and paper making activities are now almost extinct. Srinagar's Kagazgar Mohalla – founded by Emperor Budshah as a hub of paper making in the sub-continent – is history. Few of our youngsters may be aware that Emperor Akbar had chosen the Kashmir paper to print Hindustani sultanate's new paper currency.

Once the thriving business of gun-making in Srinagar's Bandookhar Mohalla is long gone too. Few would today know that Srinagar's Purzager Mohalla once produced some of the finest metal spare parts for many machines of those times.

For centuries Maharaj Gunj was the hub of regional trade and commerce in commodities. Today it is like a ghost market.

Besides the economic loss and the developmental retardation, Srinagar has suffered a tremendous psychological loss. That psychological loss now manifests in a lack of confidence and a general reluctance to take bold initiatives.

A lot of all this loss could be addressed. For that we would need something of a Social and Economic Revival Plan for Srinagar, with the over-arching goal of reviving its social and economic grandeur. That goal needs to have these principal objectives:

1. Heritage conservation and promotion (creation of a Budshah Institute of Heritage Architecture would be lovely)
2. Infrastructure development (by way of a special fund, either through JNNURM or Smart City scheme)
3. Revival of traditional economic activities through a specific Youth Arts and Crafts Entrepreneurship Initiative
4. Poverty eradication through a *Shehr-i-Khas* Poverty Eradication Program, focused on both men and women
5. Heritage tourism through youth-led package tour programs

6. Revival of Kashmir commodities trade and marketing through Maharaj Gunj Business Hub Revival Plan
7. Enhanced mobility through a private-sector led River Water Transportation Plan and
8. Heritage promotion through a Know-Your-Heritage School Excursion Program.

In 2007 Srinagar was put in the watch list of 100 most endangered sites across the world for 2008 by the World Monuments Fund (WMF). We must build on that listing and its potential for securing funding and expertise in Srinagar's heritage conservation. The scope of INTACH's good work in this area needs to be expanded.

Srinagar's overall infrastructure has degraded over the years. It continues to get the lowest per capita plan funds. Between 2009 and 2012, Srinagar district got the lowest funds under district planning – Rs 143 crore only, while as Jammu and Leh districts got Rs 265 crore and Rs 220 crore respectively.

The visitor pressure on the city's public infrastructure is intense. In 2011, the City Mayors Foundation – a global advocacy think tank – listed Srinagar as the 92nd fastest growing urban areas in the world in terms of economic growth projections through 2020. Srinagar's infrastructure development plan has to be in line with that projection.

Two of Srinagar's main entrances – the Athwajan and the Parimpora corridors – continue to be clogged due to non-expansion of the roads there, inhibiting business, jeopardizing normal work and scuttling goods mobility. The mess of those two critical nodes is symbolic of the governance failure of the present government.

It is a shame that despite that mess Kashmir has got a meager Rs 15 crore under the Central Road Fund (CRF) program out of the total Rs. 109 crore for 2013-14 for the state.

Some six centuries ago Hazrat Syed Mir Ali Hamadani (RA) ushered in an economic revolution from Srinagar's Khankah-i-Moula area that sustained us for centuries. We cannot imagine to replicate that revolution today. But we can of course aim to replicate a part of that. If we fail, Srinagar will die.

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'Hindu CM': Does it matter?

What good have the Muslim Chief Ministers done to the State that should set the alarm bells ringing over 'Amit Shah installing a Hindu CM in the State'!



SPOTLIGHT

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Lo and Behold! The right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party chief Amit Shah, we are fed, is the party's 'prime strategist.' He has, as media reports suggest, 'changed the political dynamics' of Uttar Pradesh in India's recently-held Lok Sabha elections and is today reported to be 'attempting to change the political dynamics' of the Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir by 'working overnight to get a Hindu Chief Minister installed in the State.' And his plan, we are informed, is simple: pump money in the pockets of turncoats like Mattus, Lones and Rashids to lure people to the polling booths, and 'tactical understanding' with some J&K politicians—may be Abdullahs and Muftis too.

While this might be (rather should be) a cause of worry for the pro-India political parties in the State which are set to fight the forthcoming Assembly elections, there is no reason for the people of Kashmir to get disturbed by this rant that is only aimed at subverting the truth about Kashmir and Kashmiris.

First, Shah's desire to have a Hindu Chief Minister for the State is a poor attempt to scare the people of Kashmir to vote and foil the poll boycott called by the pro-freedom leaders, particularly Syed Ali Geelani. In India, where the BJP-led Government has come to power on the so-called 'people's mandate', the Assembly poll boycott across Kashmir would obviously leave it red-faced, as it has left the Congress earlier. Shah himself unveils the 'central idea': "Imagine the message that would go around the world, if we succeed in installing a BJP leader as the democratically-elected CM of Jammu and Kashmir." Just reverse this "imagination" a bit and imagine the message that would go around the world if pro-freedom leaders succeed in ensuring the poll boycott across Kashmir?

After the BJP got the news

of "Shah working to install a Hindu Chief Minister in J&K" floated in a section of Indian media—as has been the case most of the times on Kashmir—many Kashmiris, including some columnists and proponents of *Azadi*, are somehow feeling the "need" for the pro-freedom leaders, particularly Geelani Sahib, to "change their strategy and refrain from calling for the poll boycott" to allow people to "foil the designs of Shah." This is not only grossly absurd on the face of it, it speaks very poor of our understanding of India's political maneuvering in Kashmir despite facing its brunt for decades together. If anyone feels such a "need", he is free to join the pro-India politics or vote. Why float the discourse to let this "need" be met through the pro-freedom leaders to make them cut a sorry figure among people and be remembered like Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, the founder of ruling National Conference, for rest of their lives and thereafter. This new discourse is like this: Since BJP has "dangerous plans" on Kashmir, therefore vote for "lesser evils" like NC or PDP—the two parties which, for all practical purposes, are pro-India, not pro-Kashmir. So, how do we benefit?

Second, even if the State gets a Hindu Chief Minister, why should it send people, at least the proponents of resistance, into a tizzy? Didn't Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah—the Muslim Chief Minister of J&K—in all his "wisdom" hand over the Kashmiri nation into the clutches of India's military apparatus, a consequence of which has been killing of unarmed civilians in firings, in fake encounters and custody; rape of women by armed forces; a continued assault on our dignity and honour etc.! Didn't his son and successor Farooq Abdullah create the dreaded "Special Task Force" of J&K Police which unleashed brutality on the people in the name of containing militancy? Didn't Mufti Muhammad Sayeed—the Muslim Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir—hand over 800 kanals of Kashmir land to the Amarnath Shrine Board in 2008, triggering an agitation that led to killing of over 60 people in action by police and paramilitary forces? Didn't Omar Abdullah—the Muslim Chief Minister of Jammu and Kash-

mir—preside over the killing of more than 120 civilians in the 2010 unrest in the Valley? What good have the Muslim Chief Ministers done to the State that should set the alarm bells ringing among people over "Amit Shah installing a Hindu CM in the State?"

Third and last, such a discourse floated by the right-wing party and its advisors is also an attempt to polarize the State further by raking up the Hindu-Muslim rant in view of the upcoming Assembly elections. And this *objective* needs to be understood by the people. Now the general perception that if BJP comes to power, "we are gone and they will execute their nefarious plans, enact anti-Kashmir laws and have a Hindu homeland in Kashmir." Such plans have met with (and will continue to meet with) stiff resistance from the people, irrespective of whether there is a BJP or NC or PDP or Congress government in the State.

The Bharatiya Janta Party for now, like Congress, is worried to have the people of Kashmir side with it and—like the Congress—flaunt that people in the Valley are the "votaries of India's democracy." Amit Shah's rant, therefore, is an attempt in that direction. And falling to it would only be suicidal for the overall political resolution of the Kashmir dispute; for separatists, and for the people too! And then the bottom-line is: We'll continue to be oppressed, no matter who heads the State and to which religion the Head of the State belongs to. Because the issue is not about chief ministers, but a political resolution of the long-pending Kashmir dispute; about oppressor and oppressed. Isn't it?



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Deserting Roots

He gave a damning smile, opened up his laptop and googled 'jobs for doctor in Gulf'.

FREEZE FRAME

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"I fear, I can't waste my talent by offering my services at that centre", Nazir told his immediate officer. "Well, you have been posted there and, as such you are supposed to work at that place", his officer replied. "It is difficult to work with these people. Moreover, I can't be helpful to them in any way. I have an expertise in a particular field that cannot be delivered there", Nazir argued with his officer. Hearing this, officer lost his temper and ordered Nazir to leave the room, adding, "It is not in my domain to transfer you unless I get a substitute for that centre. I can't afford to betray the people of that place as they have toiled a lot to get someone posted at their centre".

Just a few days after this altercation, the officer receives a communication from his head office directing him to relieve Nazir as he was transferred to some other place, and

that too without replacing him with a proper substitute.

Nazir, a humble boy, was bought up in a beautiful hamlet that was officially declared backward. His studies were as attractive to him as his hamlet. He was sharp enough to aspire for something that the predecessors of his hamlet could not achieve. He worked somewhat hard and cracked the medical entrance examination and got an entry in category quota of being the resident of the backward hamlet.

During the initial years of his college education, Nazir continued to be very much attached to the people of his hamlet. His parents also had high expectations from him. They wanted him to serve the unfortunate ailing people of his hamlet who for the want of medical assistance had to trek through woods and hills to reach the nearest medical facility. Most of the times, extreme weather conditions would deter the people of hamlet to reach the nearby health centre in time, thus causing morbidity and mortality. Children and expecting mothers were the worst sufferers.



As years passed along, Nazir was getting familiar with a different world. During his final year at college, he rarely went to see his parents. Meanwhile, he finished his bachelor's degree in medicine and got selected for specialization in children's disease, again against a category quota.

With the flow of time, his aspirations saw a gradual shift. Rather than doing something for his people, he became self-centered and thought only for his materialistic growth. While most of his contemporaries held themselves back from such temporal stratagem, Nazir and one of his friends who

hailed from the city, where the college was situated, indulged in malpractice in the hospital. They used to get kickbacks for prescribing medicines of certain manufacturing companies and dabbled in other sorts of unprofessional conduct.

Nazir was not now ready to even distinguish the people of his hamlet. When any of them was referred to his hospital, he displayed indifference and letdown to help them. Meanwhile, the senior citizens of his hamlet relentlessly tried to get a doctor posted at their newly constructed Primary Health Centre (PHC). By virtue of the interest expressed by the inhabitants of the hamlet, Nazir was lucky enough to get a job in government health services, once more in a category quota list, and was posted at his hamlet's PHC.

The posting came as sad news for Nazir since he was reluctant to go back to his roots, his native place. Somehow, he joined the centre but displayed a casual approach in disposing off his duties towards his rural community. Being exposed to

an urban milieu, he was feeling very uncomfortable while treating the people of his hamlet.

Eventually, Nazir expressed his 'inability' to work at the said PHC. Failing to motivate his steadfast officer, Nazir exploited his newly developed contacts with pharma companies and other influential people, and got himself transferred from the health head-office. However, Nazir's immediate officer wrote back to his head-office demanding a substitute doctor for the neglected hamlet. Ironically, no one was ready to serve the people of Nazir's hamlet.

Some days later, Nazir was wading through the newspaper pages when he came across the news report about the doctors disinterested in working in rural areas likely to be terminated and their posts getting re-advertised.

Nazir was not at all moved by the news. Actually, his roots had also started to disown him. He gave a damning smile, opened up his laptop and googled 'jobs for doctor in Gulf'.

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