

Burhan Wani's Death and Its Implications for Kashmir

The always fragile peace in the Kashmir valley again came apart after the killing of Burhan Wani, a Hizbul Mujahideen commander on the 8th of July, 2016 by the security forces. The Kashmir valley has been on the boil since then with over 78 people being killed and over 1400 left injured. Burhan's death has fired the imagination of an ordinary Kashmiri as also manifested in the huge response circulating across cell phones, emails and social media in the aftermath thereof.

It is the state police and the other Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) which mainly bore the brunt of public fury in the entailing law and order situations, with towns of Pampore and Bijbehara becoming the nerve centres. The same severely affected such basic functions as the Road Opening Procedure (ROP) of the security forces which has been the most predictable and standard drill undertaken during such operations, thereby compromising their efficiency and effectiveness. With Pakistan trying to fish in the troubled waters by reiterating its moth-eaten demand for a 'plebiscite' in Kashmir, the security forces including the local police exercised maximum restraint in the teeth of utmost provocations from the rabble rousers by not falling into the trap by treating it as a mere law and order problem.

Burhan Wani, a young home-grown terrorist who led a strong group of 60–70 educated Kashmiri youths, had emerged as a new cult figure of Kashmiri resistance and alienation. Although allegedly there were no known or reported major terrorist actions in his name, his rebellious self-projection on social network catapulted him into popular imagination. His bold messages encouraging disaffection among Kashmiri masses on social media attracted the attention of Kashmiri youths, making him rightly fall out with our law enforcement agencies as causing disaffection and waging war against the country itself is a big offence. Hundreds of thousands of young Kashmiris who joined Burhan's funeral procession amply prove his popularity.

Barely out of their teens, Burhan and his small band of Kashmiri militants, had become an internet sensation not only in Kashmir but also across the border. Burhan, who had a Rs. 10

lakh bounty on his head, represented the dangerous new face of home-grown militancy after he took to guns reportedly to avenge the allegedly unjustified killing of his innocent brother by the Indian security forces. The first militant from Kashmir to reveal his identity on social media, Burhan may have been dead but the aftermath of his death has proved too hot to handle for the ruling dispensation.

The situation is redolent of the 2010 civilian unrest when 120 people lost their lives. The present trouble in Kashmir is said to be a reflection of the changed ground reality as could be gauged from the cold statistics. While in 2013, only 31 local youths had joined militancy, the number was said to be 66 in 2015 which rose up to 91 in 2016 if police records are to be believed. After the insurgency began first in 1989, the locals are once again said to be outnumbering the Pak-sponsored 'foreign terrorists'. Reportedly, north Kashmir had 66 local and 44 foreign terrorists while the numbers were 109 and 7 respectively in south Kashmir till recently.

All said and done, the quantum of infiltration attempts in the Valley has seen a spike in recent times which is a reflection of the worsening ground situation in Kashmir. It has been a common knowledge that a politically unstable Pakistan has always meant renewed provocation in Kashmir from across the border as a diversionary tactic from its own domestic problem. This is usually through realignment with the sundry terror groups operating from its soil to regain the lost ground in Kashmir which it continues to hold as an unfinished agenda of partition.

Terrorism, as inspired and instigated by Pakistan, has been changing tack to mutate to its newer form. The new strategy is said to recruit the unemployed, young Kashmiri youths by encashing on their disaffection and alienation due to alleged systemic high-handedness by giving them basic training in armed militancy. This is more so because Pakistan has increasingly found it difficult to push foreign terrorists across the 'line of control' (LOC) because of increased vigil and alertness by the Indian security forces. With 60 per cent of the Valley population being below 30, it becomes easier for the terrorist organisations to brainwash them to their advantage in the name of religion and better future prospects.

The task becomes easier for these sinister forces more because of the shrinking job avenues and increasing popular alienation. The demographic bulge comprising the youth is not afraid of revealing their identity on social media and of directly engaging with the people in support of their cause. The local mosques are increasingly becoming congregation points where religious leaders are holding animated discussions with the local people on the issues of threats to Islam and Kashmiriyat.

With the unfolding situation proving too intractable, a total absence of leadership and initiative was noticed on the ground but for the security and police forces slugging it out on the ground to deal with an irate stone-pelting mob. While critics alleged a relative disengagement of New Delhi from the unfolding scene of action, the state government also appeared to have withdrawn into cocoon for fear of becoming unpopular among the people. With political class being isolated and clueless, popular politics almost came to a grinding halt in the immediate aftermath of Burhan's death. The government was allegedly conspicuous by its absence in the Valley.

The resultant vacuum on the ground has made the situation more complicated and a happy hunting ground for further penetration of the divisive ideology as bandied by the ilks of Burhan Wani. In the developing tinder-box situation, it would be more than advisable to immediately engage with the alienated population of the state now significantly dominated by the youth of Burhan's generation. The romantic appeal of a resistance against the establishment as represented by Burhan Wani, if not checked immediately, may soon get out of hand to further encourage the irredentist designs of sinister forces, duly aided and abetted by Pakistan, as operating within and without Kashmir.

The crisis, as experienced in the wake of Burhan's death, has the potential to inject new lease of life into fading insurgency since the time of restoration of a popularly-elected government in Kashmir. Retrieving the ground lost to the separatist forces by careful nurturing of a democratic superstructure of some credibility has been the real achievement in the post-1990 Kashmir. Its possible loss or even a setback can unravel all the gains made so far in this troubled border state.

The moderates who have slowly receded into background by being rendered irrelevant after the hawks and extremists took over the centre stage need to be encouraged by the government to reach out to the alienated Kashmiri people by directly engaging them in the ongoing peace process. A Kashmir policy, backed by a well-coordinated security and welfare plan as well as a synergised strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan's propaganda, needs to be evolved immediately by opening a process of sustained dialogue in favour of lasting peace and security in the Valley. A positive and constructive intervention with a view to securing a political solution of the present impasse in Kashmir appears to be the only logical and viable answer.

Salient Points

- The fragile peace in Kashmir came apart after killing of Burhan Wani, a Hizbul Mujahideen commander on the 8th of July, 2016.
- Pakistan has been trying to fish in troubled waters by reiterating its demand for a 'plebiscite' in Kashmir.
- The security forces including police exercised maximum restraint in the teeth of utmost provocations.
- Burhan's bold messages encouraged disaffection among Kashmiri masses on social media.
- Burhan may have been dead but aftermath of his death has proved too hot to handle.
- The situation is redolent of the 2010 civilian unrest when 120 people lost their lives.
- The infiltration attempts in the Valley have seen a spike in recent times which is a reflection of the worsening situation in Kashmir.
- A politically unstable Pakistan has always meant renewed provocation in Kashmir from across the border as a diversionary tactic.
- The new strategy is said to recruit the unemployed, young Kashmiri youths by encashing on their disaffection due to alleged systemic high-handedness.
- The state government appeared to have withdrawn into cocoon for fear of becoming unpopular among the people.
- A Kashmir policy, backed by a well-coordinated security and welfare plan as well as a synergised strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan's propaganda, needs to be evolved immediately.

Glossary

Fragile: easily breakable

Brunt: chief impact of an action

Alienation: condition of being controlled or exploited

Disaffection: feeling dissatisfied with people in authority

To avenge: to take revenge

Insurgency: uprising

Diversiory: intended to distract attention from something important

To slug it out: to work hard

Penetration: going deep inside

Hawk: a person advocating aggressive policy

Synergised: coordinated

Redolent: reminiscent or suggestive