

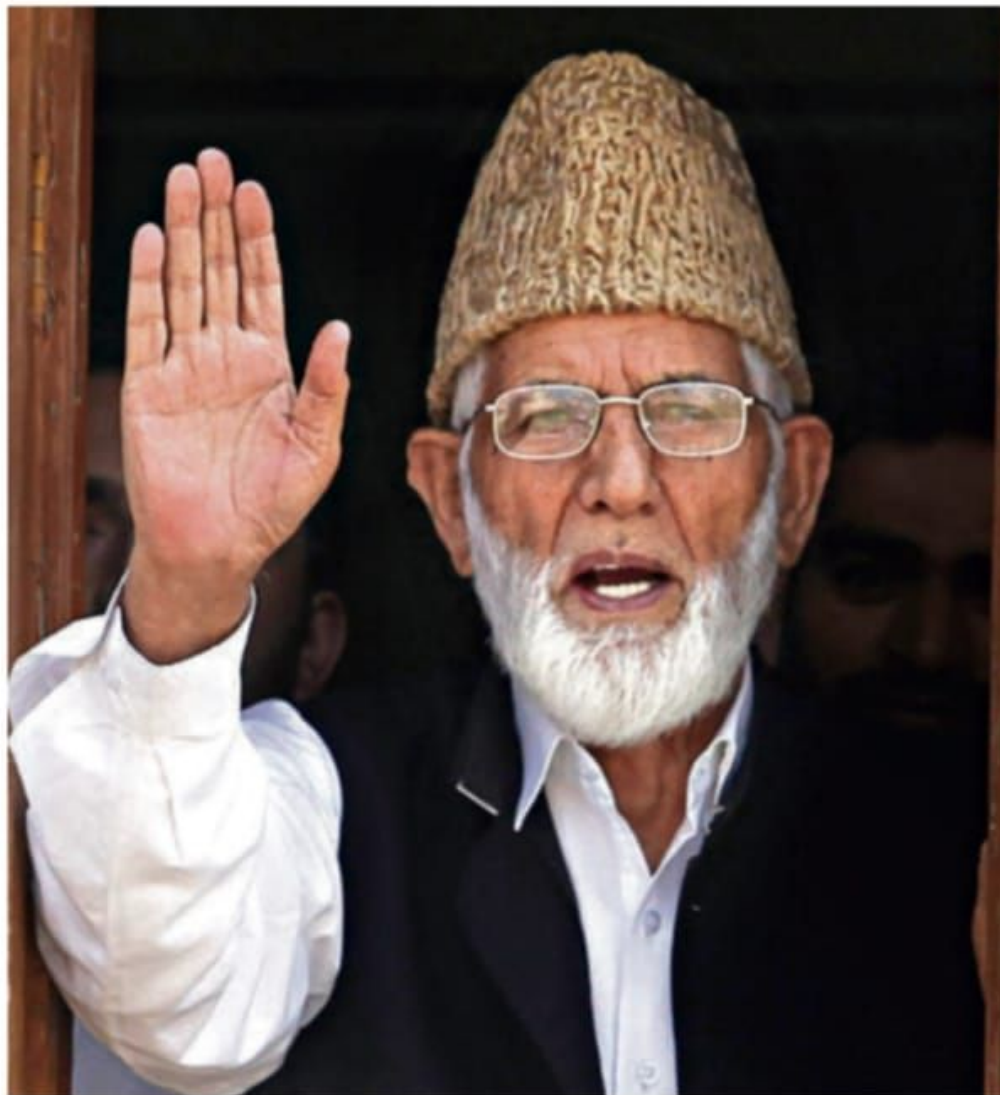
# A bruised politician

Syed Ali Geelani's (1929–2021) stance remained unwavering: the solution for Kashmir lies in the plebiscite, a vote to determine whether Kashmir will go to India or to Pakistan, a promise made by India's first Prime Minister and by Indian diplomats at the U.N. BY IFTIKHAR GILANI

FOR the generation born in the 1960s and 1970s in the North Kashmir town of Sopore, Syed Ali Geelani, a fiery orator, was a local version of Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh or Ayatollah Khomeini. From raising local issues such as the upgradation of an agriculture college into a university to taking to the streets against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and, then a year later, the Israeli move to annex the city of Jerusalem, he could bring the Kashmir valley's commercial centre to a halt through his street power.

But as Guevara said, revolution is not an apple that falls when it is ripe, you have to make it fall, Geelani, who passed away on September 1, was an important factor behind the launching of an armed movement in 1989 in Jammu and Kashmir after the failure of the political struggle. He had joined electoral politics and represented Sopore in the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly three times. Even though the now-banned Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front is seen as the pioneer of armed insurgency in the valley, it was Geelani who had called on the people to remember the two *Alifs* (Urdu alphabet) and resort to unity and possessing arms (*Ittihad* and *Aslaha*) to protect themselves. He gave this call at a rally in Baramulla town, protesting against the custodial killing of a tailor soon after a heavily rigged 1987 election.

The political landscape in Kashmir is broadly divided into two camps: the anti-India camp and the



**SYED ALI GEELANI** waving to the media before his arrest in Srinagar on September 8, 2010.

anti-New Delhi, or anti-Centre, camp; the constituents of the latter are also known as mainstream parties, represented by the National Conference (N.C.) and the Peoples

Democratic Party (PDP). Fortunately, for New Delhi, the anti-India camp remained divided and subdued after 1947.

The Muslim Conference lost its



grip with the flight of its top leadership—Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas and Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah—to Pakistan after the tribal invasion of Kashmir in October 1947. So, the separatist fringe groups cutting across ideological affiliations saw Geelani as their primary backer and political face in the early 1990s. But his association with the Jammāt-e-Islami, which demanded strict discipline and discouraged personality-based politics, did put roadblocks in the way of his political clout. But it was the Jammāt

cadres who prepared the ground for the 1989 uprising, working tirelessly distributing cassettes of his speeches across the length and breadth of the State. It is, however, another story that when the fruit was ripe, they were hesitant to pluck it.

#### HUMBLE BACKGROUND

Geelani was the son of a daily wage labourer; his humble background, so unlike that of the traditional leadership of the Mirwaiz or the Sheikh family, was also something

that clicked in the imagination of the young generation, who now wanted to see an earthy rather than a divine leader. His autobiography *Walla Kinaray* is replete with incidents of how he went hungry for want of food and of how as a primary class student he had to walk 18 kilometres every day on an empty stomach to reach his school from his village. Sensing his poverty and quest for education, the Lahore-based Kashmiri historian and writer Munshi Mohammad Din

Fauq had offered to help and took him to Lahore. But he then forgot his promise and made Geelani a servant, forcing the young lad to return to Kashmir.

Like Sheikh Abdullah and Mirwaiz Muhammad Farooq, Geelani also learned political lessons under the wing of the ace political activist and scholar Maulana Mohammad Sayeed Masoodi in Mujahid Manzil, the N.C. headquarters in the heart of old Srinagar city. Thus, Masoodi is a kind of character in Kashmir history

who gave the region three important leaders.

#### MEETING MUSHARRAF

The Indian government considered Geelani a stubborn obstacle to its efforts to find a solution to the issue of Jammu and Kashmir within the ambit of the Constitution. Pakistan's military ruler Pervez Musharraf echoed this view and described Geelani as the biggest hurdle to the resolution of the issue. When Musharraf came to India in 2005 deter-

mined to push for a settlement on Kashmir within the framework of his four-point formula, he tried hard to get Geelani on board. In his autobiography, Geelani gave graphic details of this meeting, saying that it turned hostile right from the beginning when Musharraf refused to shake hands with his bearded political secretary, Noor Ahmed. As they sat down, the military ruler lashed out at Geelani for issuing statements on Balochistan and condemning the killing of the Baloch leader Akbar Bugti. Then, Musharraf said that India was a country with a population of more than one billion people with nuclear power and had the backing of Western powers. "We have also fought three wars. Kashmiris have also sacrificed. But nothing was achieved. Now we must adopt a path of compromise and reconciliation... [United States President] George [W.] Bush and [British Prime Minister] Tony Blair are on board on the peace process with India," said Musharraf.

When Geelani refused, Musharraf lost his temper. He got further riled up when the ageing leader told him that he was "killing his own people" by collaborating with the U.S. in Afghanistan. He charged Geelani with "speaking the language of Pakistan's opposition". Back in Pakistan, Musharraf ordered the closure of the Geelani-led Hurriyat offices and choked his funding. His faction had to close its office in Srinagar's Rajbagh locality. Many people in the Kashmiri diaspora in capitals across the world stopped interacting with him. Many people involved in track II (back-channel) diplomacy, for whom Musharraf's formula was a godsend and an opportunity to settle the issue of Jammu and Kashmir forever, tried to convince Geelani. But his curt reply would be: "Go and implement this formula. If it brings peace and settles the issue, I will automatically become politically irrelevant."

Once, Ghulam Rasool Kar, former president of the Congress party's State unit, visited Geelani's home and tried to convince him to talk to New Delhi for the peace process. Kar, who also belonged to Sopore, accused Geelani of wanting

## 'BJP wanted to have dialogue with me'

Interview with Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Kashmir's veteran pro-resistance leader. BY ANANDO BHAKTO.

SYED ALI SHAH GEELANI, hard-line Hurriyat leader who passed away in Srinagar on September 1 at the age of 91, believed that the Sangh Parivar's rhetoric on Article 370 had less to do with safeguarding India's integrity or securing the economic progress of Jammu and Kashmir than with its electoral politics and its attempts to create a Hindu rashtra.

In this unpublished interview with Anando Bhakto in 2014, soon after Narendra Modi came to power, Geelani cautioned that the Modi regime's agenda was the increasing marginalisation, and possible expulsion of, Muslims. His words are relevant in the times of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). In a sharp contrast to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) public derision of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government for its policy of dialogue and negotiation *vis-a-vis* Jammu and Kashmir, Geelani claims that the BJP had sent emissaries to him with an offer of dialogue shortly before the 2014 election. Excerpts:

**The BJP under Narendra Modi has reiterated its pledge to scrap Article 370 and 35A.**

The RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh] and the BJP's politics in Kashmir is guided by their electoral interests in India. Whenever elections are round the corner, as is the case this year [2014], they rake up Kashmir and stoke fear among the Indians by creating imaginary threat[s] from the Kashmiri Muslims and from the special provisions contained in Articles 370 and 35A.

The fact of the matter is a series of presidential orders over the past decades eroded the salient provisions of the Act. Article 370 has become hollow in the present context as most of Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy guaranteed under it has been ended. To give an example, the Election Commission and the Supreme Court of India did not have jurisdiction in the State earlier, but now they do.

However, very few Indians have an informed opinion of Kashmir and its layered history and politics. The BJP taps this ignorance to give greater circulation to the false notion that India's integrity is threatened by Article 370 and the only way to safeguard it is by taking away Jammu and Kashmir's Constitutional guarantees.

**The BJP and the Sangh Parivar maintain that Articles 370 and 35A**

**are an impediment to economic development in Jammu and Kashmir.**

This is a myth generated by right-wing groups in collusion with the national media. Article 370 is not a barrier to the setting up of industries in Jammu and Kashmir. The Land Grafts Bill ratified in 1977 allows non-state subjects to buy land for a period of 90 years for the purpose of setting up factories. Kashmir has the example of chains of hotels and other private entities that have been operating here.

**There is also the notion that Jammu and Kashmir's special status has played a role in alienating Kashmiris from the rest of India.**

This is a narrative peddled by the BJP to mould public opinion and build their case against Jammu and Kashmir's special status. The purpose of Article 370 was to find a political solution to the State of Jammu and Kashmir by determining whether people here would want a permanent merger with India. The treaty of accession signed between India and Maharaja Hari Singh on October 26, 1947, granted India authority in only three areas: defence, foreign affairs and communication. No less a person than India's first Prime Minister,

Jawaharlal Nehru, promised that Kashmir's future would be decided in accordance with the wishes of the people through a referendum held under international auspices like the United Nations.

**What will be the people's response if Article 370 is abrogated?**

If there is any attempt to do away with Article 370, it will invite State-wide protests. Jammu and Kashmir is considered a disputed territory internationally. We will not derail from our right to self-determination. If any measures are taken to revoke Article 370, we will launch a disciplined campaign against it across the State.

**There is a murmur that you met emissaries from the BJP in the run-up to the 2014 elections.**

A few people on behalf of the BJP came to meet me on March 22 [2014]. They were confident that the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance would come to power, and they wanted to know whether I would be interested in a dialogue with the future government.

**Is dialogue not preferable to violent forms of resistance?**

I believe that war is not a solution, but any dialogue between us and New Delhi is conceivable only

when our three-point demands are fulfilled. One, New Delhi will have to accept Jammu and Kashmir as a disputed territory; two, release all political detainees in Kashmir; and three, withdraw the occupying forces [the Indian Army]. Since 1947, there have been more than 150 dialogues between India, Pakistan and pro-freedom leaders in Kashmir. But what was the outcome of that? There is a need for analysis of dialogues held in the past rather than hold a fresh one.

**How do you see India under the BJP led by Modi?**

They [the BJP] are the proponents of Hindutva and they want to enforce their ideology coercively. The BJP's ideological parent is the RSS, which is not kindly disposed towards the Muslims. There is an atmosphere of fear and apprehension among the Indian Muslims and that is not unfounded. The Sangh's agenda is to marginalise the Muslims or, worse, expel them altogether.

**The BJP won three Lok Sabha seats from Jammu and Kashmir in the 2014 general election.**

The BJP has been playing an openly communal politics in Jammu. The party owes its success in Jammu to polarisation witnessed in the aftermath of the Kishtwar riots.



to remain clean to ensure a grand funeral for himself and told him that the moderate Hurriyat group led by Mirwaiz Umar Farooq was engaged in talks. "Let them bring something concrete, I will garland them. Let me go into political oblivion," Geelani reportedly said, according to insiders privy to this meeting.

Geelani went on to say that he would prefer the obscure death of Sofi Mohammad Akbar (a lieutenant of Sheikh Abdullah's, who rejected the 1975 Indira-Sheikh Accord and continued to hold the flag of the Plebiscite Front until his death in 1987) to the grand funeral of Sheikh Abdullah. Over the years, owing to New Delhi's non-implementation of any of its promises and the failure of the Musharraf formula, those who supported them became political non-entities while Geelani's clout grew in geometric proportions. He addressed a particular psyche of Kashmiris, who did not want to see their leaders supplicating before New Delhi and Islamabad, and continued politics on his own terms, thereby showing he was "incorruptible".

#### **GEELANI'S STREET CONTROL**

While he was a pioneer or backer of an armed insurgency, after the 1999 Kargil War, there was a judicious change in his attitude as well as those of the other Hurriyat leaders. While others saw it as a chance to open channels with New Delhi, Geelani realised that an armed insurgency would not last without the backing of a strong political movement. For five years before the 2008 Amarnath land row and alleged economic blockade of Kashmir valley by some extremist groups in Jammu, Geelani had travelled to villages and towns as far away as Gurez to Poonch to prepare the ground for political agitation.

He showed his control over the streets when in 2010 he went to the old city of Srinagar and convinced youths to stop stone pelting as the police returning fire was only increasing the number of casualties. When his appeals fell on deaf ears, he went to the old city, where his car was also attacked with stones. He got out and stood on the bonnet of the car

and dared stone pelters to stone him to death. An eerie calm prevailed. He gave a speech to the waiting crowd, which helped a return to normalcy. He was accused of selling out for this feat. But he stood his ground.

In the 2016 street agitations after the killing of the militant leader Burhan Wani, almost every day agitators were burning police stations and many people were dying when the police returned fire. When the situation went out of control, a group of civil society activists reached out to him and asked him to intervene. He refused at first, but when he was convinced that it was only leading to the deaths of youths, he did issue a statement asking people to agitate away from police stations and security camps. Instantly, the attacks on police stations stopped. In his autobiography, Geelani wrote that it was necessary to develop a sustainable model of resistance where the financial and daily requirements of people were also addressed. Defending stone-throwing, he wrote that it was a reaction and not an action. "When 123 unarmed people are killed in 2010 and even none of them was throwing stones, how will people react or do you want [them] to stay indifferent?"

His stance remained unwavering: the solution for Kashmir lies in the plebiscite, a vote to determine whether Kashmir will go to India or to Pakistan, a promise made by India's first Prime Minister and by Indian diplomats at the United Nations. He was also clear that he would vote for Pakistan if ever a plebiscite was held. "But if the majority of people vote for India, I will accept the result and be a good Indian citizen," he said repeatedly.

#### **AGAINST SECTARIANISM**

Every leader has strengths and weaknesses. His unwavering nature earned him brownie points and addressed the psyche of Kashmiris, who are used to leaders crawling too often when told just to bend. But this also brought continued suffering. In 2010, he tried to mix resistance with addressing the daily needs of people, but that did not work out and quite

often he resorted to ordering hartals and shutdowns. In the 1990s when Kashmiri Pandits started to migrate, he was in prison along with many other senior leaders, but his party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, should have used its cadres to prevent this catastrophe because of its history. The Jamaat prevented attacks on the minority community in the first-ever communal riot that hit South Kashmir in 1986. Many were unhappy with his Islamist ideology, but one of his major contributions is that he did not allow a sectarian culture to grow in Jammu and Kashmir. And despite his religious beliefs, he was quite close to radical communists and liberals in mainland India.

Since the Mughals invaded, arrested and exiled Kashmir's last king, Yusuf Shah Chak, in 1585, there has hardly been any Kashmiri leader who has stood the test of the time. Geelani remained a bruised politician all through his life, going in and out of jail, and at the end of a 11-year-long stint of house arrest was more heartbreak. Past midnight, police raided his residence in the Hyderpora locality of Srinagar, allegedly trampled on everything, thrashed family members and took away his remains for the funeral. They did not allow any family member to accompany the body and perform the last rites. He could have been sent to his last journey in a better way while observing security protocols. He left the world bruised and battered. This incident will go down in history and be remembered forever in the same way that Prime Minister Narendra Modi could recall after 1,000 years the ravages of the Afghan invader Mehmood Gaznavi at the Somnath temple. Fortune and history move like a wheel. The incident will haunt rulers in India forever.

In contrast, when Geelani's daughter Surayya died in April 2001, the then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, sent a condolence note even though he was touring Iran at the time. It looks like India has changed and changed fast. □

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