

RADICALIZATION VERSUS GLORIFICATION

BY

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In recent times questions are being raised on reasons behind increasing number of youth picking the gun in lieu of the pen in Kashmir. The most common reasons being given are radicalization, highhandedness of security forces, lack of employment opportunities and poor governance. The most dominating factor mentioned by all is radicalization.

Security experts claim the current tipping point in Kashmir was the elimination of Burhan Wani in 2016. He was a poster boy militant, who had won hearts of the locals. In Feb this year, the state government released details of youth joining militant ranks over the past few years. The figures are 54 in 2010, 23 in 2011, 21 in 2012, 16 in 2013, 53 in 2014, 66 in 2015, 88 in 2016 and 120 in 2017. This year till date 28 youth have joined militant ranks. The spurt evidently is post the Burhan Wani encounter.

As per the local police, his elimination and subsequent unrest was alone responsible for 110 youth joining militant ranks. A police report stated that 'the more militants are killed, the more over ground workers have to become militants to fill the gap.' During encounters in recent months over 16 trapped militants have also surrendered to police forces, details of whom are kept closely guarded. Youth from villages which were untouched by earlier violence are now picking the gun.

An article in Bright Kashmir on 05 Dec 2017 states, 'the youth of Kashmir is picking the gun because right from his birth he has seen violence and injustice. He lives with this violence and grows with it and suddenly one day we see him with an AK 47.' This report may justify anger and frustration, not solely radicalization. Kuldeep Khuda, the ex-DGP of Police J and K, stated in an interview with The Indian Express during a seminar in Delhi last week, that in his assessment, 2018 may witness more violence than earlier years as the number of youth joining militancy may rise.

Radicalization in the valley is neither new nor has the valley ever merged itself with India. It has always considered itself as a separate entity. Those who visited the valley even before the commencement of the proxy war were always referred to as tourists from India. It was not 'All India Radio' but 'Radio Kashmir'. While support for Pak never existed, neither did support for India.

The attacks on Kashmiri Pundits in Jan 1990 leading to their mass exodus changed Kashmir forever. Of the entire Pundit population in the valley pre-Jan 1990, only two to three thousand remain. Thus, for youth growing up post this period, the valley has only witnessed calls for one religion for prayer. Temple bells have all but ceased to ring, with most temples even destroyed or dilapidated. With only one religion predominant in the region, secularism in the valley has all but vanished.

The youth have been made to believe that the valley is only for them and no other community is welcome. This factor has been exploited by Pakistan, Imams, separatists and even politicians. Calls for Jihad, stone pelting and interfering in encounters have flowed from Mosques, Pakistan and separatists, exploiting religious sentiments. Farooq Abdullah stated post the supreme court commencing hearing on Article 35A case, that any action to tamper with it, would lead to levels of violence never witnessed, thus threatening the centre and inciting the population.

As per the census of 2011, the population of Kashmir valley was pegged at 69.1 Lakhs. A report in Live Mint in Mar last year stated that 63% of the population was under the age of 30 and 70% under the age of 35. Thus, logically the youth would have only witnessed militancy and the presence of no other religion, hence have been radicalized from their childhood.

If radicalization was the major cause for youth taking the gun, then the figures joining militant ranks would have been more worrisome as majority of the population comprise the youth. Further, the figures would have been similar all through the years, with no extra spurt post the elimination of Burhan Wani. Present figures indicate approximately two hundred plus local militants from a possible male youth population of over 30 Lakhs. Hence radicalization is alone not the reason, while it may be an instigator.

A special report in News 18.com article on 5th Apr this year on the encounter in Anantnag where Rouf Ahmad Khanday was eliminated post his refusal to surrender states, 'thousands thronged to the funeral and chanted anti-India slogans. A bearded man even praised him for his commitment.' The report states that shots were fired in the air as a mark of respect and the body was draped in a Pakistani flag. Such a burial is the nearest to a state funeral which is accorded to a security personnel killed in anti-militant action.

The same article mentions that in Shopian, thousands gathered for the funeral of Zubair Turray, one of the thirteen militants eliminated in a single day this month. A college student stated during the procession, 'They have killed Zubair, but you will see the next Zubair coming from this funeral only.'

Most of the militants who joined last year were part of Burhan Wani's funeral.' This student, in his simple words, brought out facts known but tended to be glossed over by authorities. Hence, in the overall analysis, it is not radicalization which is the major cause for youth picking the gun, but glorification of eliminated militants.

Burhan Wani was mentioned in the UN General Assembly by Nawaz Sharif as a leader and Geelani of the Hurriyat even announced the award of a medal to him. This glorification led to many more youth, presently unemployed and leading mundane lives to join militant ranks to gain name and fame, knowing if eliminated, they would at least be respected. A PDP leader, Waheed-ur-Para claims, 'it is a cause of alarm that youth find dying attractive'.

It is the family burial, which the state has permitted on humanitarian grounds which has led to an increase in youth joining militancy, not radicalization. Radicalization had always existed.

The state would be aware but is unwilling to accept reality as bringing about changes in its present policy is difficult. Instead it blames security forces for their highhanded approach, while dropping charges against stone pelters. It is aware that if it changes its burial policy, its vote banks may be affected. It is time it decides on what it truly desires, lesser youth picking the gun and being eliminated or votes by refusing to change its policy.

The state leadership must understand the difference between a misguided youth and a militant. A militant is an enemy of the country and should be treated as such. His burial should be done with religious honours and by the state, not his village. The state must consider safeguarding its youth from the gun culture rather than securing its votes. It is a difficult choice but must be made.

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