**Notes on Kashmir**

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August 4, 2018

The positive tabdeeli: Much before the 2018 elections, we have noticed quite a few positive and eventful changes taking place in Pakistan with regard to Kashmir. First, Coke Studio released a well-known Kashmiri folk song, ‘Ha Gulo’, which was sung by resistance fighter-turned-singer Altaf Mir. The song was well-received in the Kashmir Valley, turning Mir into an instant celebrity. It also won admiration from old-school connoisseurs.

Now, Zara Shahjahan, a Lahore-based fashion label, has produced a wonderful song, ‘Sahibo’, which has been inspired by Kashmiri folk music. An excerpt of the song released over social media is simply brilliant. According to Saif Rehman, the CEO of the fashion brand, the video for the song was shot in Azad Kashmir as part of the label’s marketing plan for their latest collection, Mushk. Mekaal Hasan composed the song and the vocals lent by Farheen Raza, a designer at Zara Shahjahan who heads the bridal department, sound fresh and invigorating.

More efforts of this nature must be made to mainstream Kashmiri music – both old and modern – across Pakistan. In addition, I hope exquisite Kashmiri handicrafts – from shawls to pherans adorned by tilla and from chain-stitched garments to flooring such as gabba – and our traditional cuisine, wazwan, also find patrons in Pakistan. This can connect Pakistani audiences with the promise that Kashmir has to offer beyond our daily tragedies.

No tabdeeli: What hasn’t changed in Naya Pakistan, so far, is the architecture of the shop-worn Parliamentary Special Committee on Kashmir. The website of the National Assembly still shows Maulana Fazlur Rehman as its chairman – a post the maverick maulvi has held since August 2008 regardless of which party has formed the government in the centre.

The position of committee chair has been used as a political bribe by ruling parties to win over and tie down the mercurial maulana who has otherwise shown rank indifference to the cause of Kashmir as well as Kashmiris. He has held the position with the status of a federal minister, relishing the endless perks in the form of day-to-day expenses and a furnished house in the Ministers’ Enclave. The annual official budget for the committee is Rs550 million. This amount is usually spent on these day-to-day expenses, with a meeting or two thrown in to justify the committee’s existence.

Fazlur Rehman is perhaps the only Pakistani politician who can boast of having no fans among Kashmiris. I have even seen deep resentment against him among Pakistan-based Kashmiri activists because his willingness to skim off privileges in the name of Kashmir is not matched by a desire to contribute anything towards the cause.

In January 2017, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, a veteran Kashmiri leader, had demanded that the government of Pakistan should remove Fazlur Rehman from the chairmanship of the Kashmir Committee as he was unsuitable for the post and lacked the commitment to work for the mandate. Geelani had asked the government of Pakistan to “appoint a person who could speak about the Kashmir issue”.

In February 2015, Sardar Khalid Ibrahim, the leader of the Jammu and Kashmir People’s Party in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, had also demanded Fazlur Rehman’s removal. Ibrahim, who is known for his forthright and blunt statements, said that Fazlur Rehman was “not a suitable person to head the committee”.

Crying as a constant: Mehbooba Mufti, the former chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, has once again started her theatrics of crying – a tactic she is known to employ at any given opportunity. This tactic has earned her the title of ‘rudaali’ – a term that is used for a traditional woman of a lower caste who is hired as a professional mourner on the death of upper-caste men in parts of Rajasthan. The term was popularised by the 1993 Bollywood film, ‘Rudaali’, which is based on a short story by Bengali author Mahasweta Devi.

More than six weeks after she was dumped by the Hindu nationalist BJP and subsequently resigned as CM, Mufti attended a carefully choreographed indoor ‘public event’ to mark the 19th founding anniversary of her party, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP). It was an ironic show of the devastation of a party that was launched with much pomp and show, with unprecedented help from the Indian security establishment.

Since the party lost power in mid-June, it has descended into chaos as several senior party members have rebelled and openly accused Mufti of institutionalising large-scale nepotism. This defiance has decimated Mufti’s authority and hold over the party, provoking an endless stream of rumours about an imminent and formal split within the party’s ranks.

Apart from making quite a confusing speech wherein she called her little over two-year political alliance with the BJP akin to “drinking a cup of poison”, Mufti cried a great deal, yet again. But this time, there were no takers for her sob story and everyone was quick to characterise her as a ‘fake’.

Farooq Abdullah, the National Conference president and former chief minister, dismissed her performance, saying that there were no buyers for her “crocodile tears” and that her new “theatrical drama” was aimed at covering her disastrous, unjust and corrupt tenure. “Mehbooba’s latest theatrical performance amounts to adding insult to injury...The people remember clearly how she clung on to power despite being sidelined and humiliated by her allies repeatedly over the course of the last four years and how she surrendered every aspect of the institution of the CM’s office to the BJP.”

Mufti tried to gain some political mileage from Imran Khan’s recent victory. In her speech, she congratulated Khan over his “stunning victory” and urged Indian Prime Minister Modi to respond positively to the overtures of the prime minister-elect and support his approach.

The ‘public event’ was quite a dampener as many senior PDP members did not turn up; they were apparently busy exploring different ways of ousting her. Later, the party released photographs of the event that had benefitted from considerable photoshopping, with many people among the supposed audience resembling strange shape-shifting characters.

Despite the riot of the lop-sided image manipulation, I was able to recognise a couple of low-rung party workers. One of them was Mufti’s relative who has taken money from several people and promised them government jobs. Now that the Mufti government’s tenure is over – and that too for good – these party workers are hiding from the people. This makes Mufti’s tears a tad bit justifiable.

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