

Azadi: The Only Way - Report from a Turbulent Few Hours in Delhi

Wednesday 27 October 2010, by [SENGUPTA Shuddhabrata](#) (Date first published: 22 October 2010).

Dear Friends,

I was present and speaking a few hours ago at a meeting titled 'Azadi: The Only Way' on the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, organized by the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners at the Little Theatre Group in Delhi yesterday (21st October). I was not present from the beginning of the meeting as I was traveling from another city, but can vouch for what occurred from around 4:30 pm till the time that the meeting wound up, well after 8:00 pm in the evening.

The meeting took place in the packed to capacity auditorium of the Little Theatre Group on Copernicus Marg at the heart of New Delhi. Several speakers, including the poet Varavara Rao, Prof. Mihir Bhattacharya, Sujato Bhadra, Gursharan Singh, Mr. Shivnandan (?) an activist from Jammu, Professor G.N.Saibaba, Professor Sheikh Showkat Hussain - Professor of Law, Srinagar University, the journalist Najeeb Mubarak, Dr. N. Venuh of the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights, the writer Arundhati Roy and myself spoke at the meeting. (I may be missing out some names, for which I apologize, but I was not present for a part of the meeting, at the very beginning) The climax of the meeting was a very substantive and significant speech by Syed Ali Shah Geelani of the Hurriyat Conference (G), which spelt out the vision of liberation (Azaadi) and Justice that Syed Ali Shah Geelani held out before the assembled public, of which I will write in detail later in this text.

The artist known as 'Inder Salim' originally from Kashmir, currently living in Delhi, made an intervention by inviting the assembled people to take (with him) the stance of a masked stone pelter for a brief, silent moment. Students from the Jawaharlal Nehru University sang a song, 'Tu Zinda Hai to Zindagi Ki Jeet Mein Yakeen Kar' invoking the delights of life and liberation. In conclusion, the meeting adopted a resolution, which was read, on behalf of the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners, by Mihir Bhattacharya.

The atmosphere, for the several hours that I was present, was absolutely electric. The vast majority of the audience was warm and appreciative of all the speakers. They were patient and respectful - and despite grave provocation from a section that identified themselves as 'Indian patriots' and partisans of the 'Kashmir as indivisible part of India' position - that repeatedly tried to interrupt the meeting and heckle speakers, and on one occasion even tried to throw an object at the dias - did not stoop to be provoked by these pathetic attempts at disruption of a peaceful gathering.

No provocative, sectarian or hateful slogans were raised by the majority of the people present. The only provocative posturing that I witnessed was undertaken by the self-declared Indian patriots, who were not stopped from having their say, but were requested simply not to disrupt the proceedings.

When their behaviour crossed the limits of public decency, they were escorted out of the premises by representatives of the Delhi Police. The Delhi Police, to their credit, did not act against the majority of the audience, simply because the majority of the audience conducted themselves in a completely civil and democratic manner.

There was no attempt made at intimidation of any kind. Professor SAR Geelani, who was conducting the proceedings on behalf of the organizers - Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners (CRPP) , repeatedly asked the people obstructing the speakers to conduct themselves in a cultured and dignified manner. His pleas were disregarded by the section of the crowd that let its 'Indian patriotism' get the better of its civilisation. When things got a little too hot on occasion, the majority of the audience present simply drowned the rude remarks and indignant posturing of the small minority of self styled Indian patriots and champions of the 'Kashmir as indivisible part of India' position - in wave after wave of cheerful but firm hand clapping.

While there as enthusiastic cheering and sloganeering from the majority of the young men and women assembled at the gathering, there was no attempt while I was present to give the slogans a religious or sectarian colour. When Syed Ali Shah Geelani said that the people of India and Kashmir are tied together by the bonds of insaaniyat (humanity), when he quoted Gandhi, or spoke of the necessity of conducting a non-violent struggle that was devoid of hatred, or even when he said that he wished to see India rise as a great power in the world, but as a power that felt no need to oppress others, he was wholeheartedly and sincerely applauded, by the majority of people present in the auditorium, regardless of whether or not they were Kashmiri.

Yesterday's meeting needs to be seen in the context of a momentum of different events, which have included public meetings at Jantar Mantar, meetings in the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Delhi University, film screenings and talks, independently organized exhibitions on the history of Jammu and Kashmir in educational institutions, photographic exhibitions on the situation in Kashmir today that have taken place recently at the India Habitat Centre, while Kashmir has reeled under the brutality of the occupation that has resulted in a hundred and eleven deaths of unarmed or stone pelting people, including children and teenagers. The momentum of this process, which recognizes the urgency of the situation in Kashmir, needs to be taken to its logical conclusion, until the world and the international community sits up and takes notice of the true nature of the hold of the Indian state on Kashmir and its people. We need many more such meetings and gatherings in Delhi, and indeed in every large city in India.

It must be maintained so that even a Barack Hussein Obama, scheduled to visit New Delhi in November, is compelled to recognize the fact that the conduct of the Indian state in Kashmir, based as it is on brutal violence and intimidation, based as it is on a disregard of every norm of the conduct of civilized governance is unacceptable to the world. You simply cannot claim to be the world's largest democracy and preside over the deaths of 70,000 people in twenty years. You cannot claim to be judged as a democracy and have laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. You cannot claim to be a democracy and have your police and paramilitaries beat children to death openly on the streets, or rape and kill young women with impunity. A state that does so is an oppressive, immoral, occupying power, and needs to be resisted by every right thinking person in the world. The Indian state's record in Kashmir over the past several decades is not only an oppression visited on the people of Kashmir, it is an insult to the United Nations, to the world community, and to every principle of justice, fairness and democracy. It is an insult to all the peace loving and freedom loving citizens of India that do not wish to see oppression carried out in their name.

This is the message that needs to go out, and is going out, not only from the streets of Srinagar, Baramulla and Kupwara, but also from gatherings, such as yesterday's, from the heart of Delhi, the capital of India. We, who are the friends of liberty and justice in India, need to stand besides our Kashmiri brothers and sisters and say to the world that we do not accept the lies put out by the Indian state and its apologists on Kashmir. That is the true significance and import of the process in which yesterday's meeting plays an important part. This process will not stop until the world takes notice. The United Nations, and the broad democratic currents as well as the political leaderships of Europe, the Americas, and of every significant power in the world needs to know that hundreds of

people, young and old, intellectuals, writers, activists, lawyers, teachers and others, Indians and Kashmiris, can stand united, in Delhi, at the heart of the Indian Republic's capital, in refusing to accept the continued occupation of Jammu and Kashmir, by India and by Pakistan. That they believe that it is only the people of Jammu and Kashmir who must decide for themselves their own future destiny, peacefully, in a climate free of coercion and intimidation.

As Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Sheikh Showkat Hussain said, all that they are asking for is the right to self determination, promised by India, before the United Nations, to be freely enacted through a plebiscite, in conditions of peace and liberty, without the presence of armed force, for the inhabitants of every part of the undivided state of Jammu and Kashmir – regardless of whether the results of that plebiscite are in favour of India, Pakistan or an independent, united, Jammu and Kashmir that can live in peace with all its neighbours in South Asia.

There was a great diversity of statements and styles present in abundant splendour at yesterday's meeting. There was no way by which the meeting could be reduced or simplified a single monotonous statement. Yes, all the panelists, spoke unambiguously about the necessity for ending the military occupation by the Indian state in Kashmir. This does not mean that their statements and sentiments were a manufactured and processed uniformity. The people on the panel may have significant political and philosophical differences amongst themselves, they may even think differently about what 'Azaadi' might mean, but this was a sign, not of the weakness, but of the strength and vitality of yesterday's gathering.

'Azaadi' if and when it comes, will not be the parting gift of an exhausted colonial power, it will be the harvest of the fruits of the imaginations and intelligences of millions of people, of their debates and their conversations. The significance of yesterday's meeting, needs to be understood in this light.

What was extremely heart warming was the fact that each speaker spoke of the fact that the voices of the people of Kashmir are no longer alone and isolated, that there is a chorus of voices in different parts of South Asia that echo and endorse their desire for liberation from a brutal militarized occupation. From my notes of the time that I was there, I recall that the writer Arundhati Roy, while endorsing the demand of Azaadi for Kashmir, reminded the audience of the need for the people of Kashmir not to be selective about justice and injustice, that they must find methods to forge webs of solidarity with all the suffering and oppressed peoples of India. She was heckled and rudely interrupted by a small group of Indian nationalists in the audience, who repeatedly raised the situation of Kashmiri Pandits, Arundhati Roy, when she was able to resume speaking, spoke unambiguously about the fact that she considered the situation of Kashmiri Pandits to be a tragedy. She was echoed in this sentiment later by Syed Ali Shah Geelani who said that he personally stands guarantee for the safety and security of all minorities, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhists, Christians and others in a future free Kashmir. He implored the Pandits to return to Kashmir, and said, that they are an integral part of Kashmiri society. He spoke of the need for ensuring that a free Kashmir was a just Kashmir, and that justice meant that the freedom, safety and security of all minorities, of their property, their places of worship, and their freedom of conscience be given the utmost importance. He reminded the assembled people that throughout these turbulent months, the people of Kashmir have continued to be hospitable to Hindu pilgrims, have set up 'Langars' (Kitchens) for them, and have cared for them when they have fallen sick, despite being at the receiving end of the violence of the Indian state.

I spoke briefly, about the fact that I was proud that so many of us had gathered in my city, Delhi, putting aside the abstraction of our politically determined, state given construct of citizenship, and standing, here, now, on the grounds of a concrete human solidarity with the people of Kashmir. I spoke of the fact that there are significant voices, even in the mainstream media who have been

compelled to recognize the urgency of the situation in Kashmir, by the sheer determination of the youth of Kashmir to get the news of what is happening in Kashmir out to the world. I spoke of the role played by facebook sites like 'Aalaw' and blogs, and the fact that the people of India and the world can no longer be kept in the dark by a pliant media, as happened in 1989-90. I spoke of the ways in which the viral circulation of leaked videos of the humiliation of Kashmiri youth on facebook pages and online fora have successfully shown us what the reality of Kashmir is today. I urged media professionals in the mainstream media to introspect and reflect on the role that they may be compelled, against their own professional ethics, to play in the psychological and propaganda war that the Indian state is currently conducting. I spoke of my sense of shame and remorse at the evasive and dissimulating role played by sections of the mainstream media in India while reporting (or not reporting) atrocities that make even the images from Abu Gharaib pale in comparison.

I am ashamed to say, that despite my respectful plea to the media to play a responsible role in their reportage of Kashmir related matters, major channels like Times Now and NDTV once again let the truth down in their reports on the days events. NDTV saw it fit to simply report this historic meeting in the terms of an incident of 'shoe throwing at SAS Geelani'. A shoe (or some other indeterminate object) was indeed thrown, but not at Geelani. It landed on a bottle of water in front of another speaker, while he was speaking. So let's at least set that record straight. Arnab Goswami of Times Now, while conducting what he likes to call a 'debate; on the programme called 'News Hour' (neither News, nor just an Hour) repeatedly uttered hysterical untruths, such as the presumption that 'No State permits the advocacy of secession and self determination' and that a meeting such as the one I participated in yesterday, were it to take place, say, in the United States, would immediately lead to all speakers present (including, presumably, myself) in being imprisoned on charges of sedition. I have to inform my readers here, that on both counts, Arnab Goswami is wrong. Seriously wrong. Either he is a misinformed idiot. Or he knows that he is wrong, and is lying to his public through his teeth. We can choose to be generous about how he would interpret his motives, and assume he is simply a fool.

Goswami, consequently demanded to know why we were not immediately imprisoned under section 124 of the Indian penal code. Arnab Goswami needs to be reminded, that in United States law, the provisions of the Sedition Act are applicable only in times when the country is in a declared state of war. And therefore his analogy does not apply, as I am not aware that the Indian republic is currently in a declared state of war, as per international law, (unless Arnab Goswami has lost his marbles to the extent that he confuses the shadow boxing that he does on television with a war declared by a state under international law). That, furthermore, the provisions of the US Sedition Law have been declared substantially void by the US Supreme Court ruling in the Brandenburg vs. Ohio (1969) judgement, and of course, by the US Supreme court guaranteeing the primacy of free speech, including 'seditious' speech, including the burning of the United States flag, under the provisions of the first amendment to the US constitution.

There have been repeated attempts made to pass a law that would make 'flag burning' an offence under US Law. Fortunately, (for liberty and free speech) as of now, these attempts have not come to pass, and currently, under US Law it is perfectly legal to advocate self-determination and secession, if done peacefully, even to the extent of burning or destroying or desecrating symbols of state authority like the national flag. Furthermore several constitutions, such as the constitutions of Canada, Ethiopia, Austria and France, implicitly or explicitly, provide for a legal expression of right to self determination, provided it is exercised in a peaceful and democratic manner, as part of the freedom of expression principle.

But the point that needs to be made is larger than whether or not Arnab Goswami is a fool and a charlatan. Yesterday's meeting was a historic opportunity for his channel, and indeed for all of the Indian mainstream media, to report and take cognizance of the fact that there is a significant section

of Indian public opinion that is actually in favour of 'Azaadi' in Kashmir. I am not suggesting that this section constitutes an overwhelming majority at present (that might change) but, that it does exist, and that it presents, cogent, precise arguments, that cannot be dismissed, (as is being done by Times Now and its ilk) by invoking the spectre of 'terrorism'. There is hardly any 'terrorism' in Kashmir today (if we don't count the Indian state and its terror) . The 111 people who have died in the past months, have not died at the hands of non-state insurgents, they have died, unarmed, facing the bullets of the Indian state. The movement for Azaadi in Kashmir has left the culture of the gun and the grenade behind. It fights today without weapons, armed only with courage. If there is a terrorist in Kashmir today, he wears the uniform of the forces of the Indian state, and carries the weapons supplied by the arsenal of the Indian state. To discount the voices that rise in dissent against this reality as 'terrorist sympathizers' as Arnab Goswami has done on his channel is to insult reality.

Syed Ali Shah Geelani spoke of the bonds of inshaaniyat that tie the peoples of Kashmir and India yesterday. I heard him say this. I was barely five feet away from him. I heard him speak of his regard and respect for the minorities in Jammu and Kashmir. I do not agree with much of what Geelani Saheb represents politically, or ideologically, but I have no hesitation in saying that what he said yesterday, was surprising for its gentleness, for its consideration, for its moderation, even for its liberality and open heartedness. This should have been big news. That Syed Ali Shah Geelani said that he wants to see a strong and resurgent India. I heard him say this. And was this reported by anyone? NO. Was it reported that he was cheered when he said this ? NO. Was it reported that no one had any thing angry to say against the struggling peoples of India? NO. Was it reported that SAS Geelani explicitly said that he is NOT against dialogue, provided that the five point formula put forward by him (none of whose provisions - 1. acceptance of the disputed nature of the territory of Jammu and Kashmir, 2. repeal of AFSPA and other black laws, 3. release of political detainees and prisoners, 4. withdrawal of the disproportionate presence of the armed forces and 5. punishment to those guilty of taking life in the past few months - require the government of India to think 'outside' the framework of the Indian Constitution) are accepted as the basis of the dialogue? NO.

Don't you think that it makes BIG news that the tallest separatist leader in Jammu and Kashmir actually, in a moderate voice, spells out, in Delhi, the fundamental basis of a considered dialogue with the Indian state, while offering it a chance to do so on bases that are absolutely reasonable and sound, and honourable to all concerned? Do you not think that a responsible media organization would consider this a scoop, a major news story? But that is not what happened.

Instead, Times Now, (and I am waiting for the morning newspapers to see how far this muck has spread) chose to focus on the deliberately staged disruption of a handful of agent provocateurs, our familiar posse of self styled patriotic champions of the continued occupation of Kashmir, who posed for the camera, hyperventilated, and occupied, perhaps no more than five percent of the attention of several patient hours. If you saw the news reports on Times Now's 'NEWSHOUR' programme, you would have thought that all of what happened was their presence as a 'protest' against the meeting. As someone who was present through much of this, I am totally, utterly aghast that a lie of such magnificent proportions could be dished out with such ease. I am aghast that Aditya Raj Kaul who was one of the panel invited by Arnab Goswami to the Times Now Newshour show could lie with a straight face by saying that there was no attempt made to 'disrupt' the meeting by those who were there to represent his point of view.

Someday, I hope that all of these people, the Arnab Goswamis of the world, find reason to repent for continuing to keep the people of India and Kashmir in the dark. They had better think hard, because the day when they will have cause to repent, is not far. Azaadi will come to Kashmir, and with it, a glimmer of Azaadi will be the share of those people in India who stood by their Kashmiri friends, in their darkest hour. Going by what I witnessed yesterday, there will be many such people, so Arnab

Goswami and his ilk had better start practicing how to say sorry, several hundred times a day.

P.S.

* From Kafil:

<http://kafila.org/2010/10/22/azadi-the-only-way-report-from-a-turbulent-few-hours-in-delhi/>