

Report on Kashmir

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A POINT OF VIEW
MINOO MASANI

I visited Kashmir for a couple of days from 25th to 27th June in response to an invitation from the All India Management Association to inaugurate their Advanced Management Training Course. I was able, while there, to meet a great many people and get a useful glimpse and a feel of how things were shaping in the Valley.

Srinagar had still not recovered from the shock of the unfortunate events of June 7. On that day, there was a complete breakdown of law and order. Men, women and children were attacked by unruly mobs and two churches were burnt down with impunity at an interval of several hours. The police were nowhere to be seen and, when visible, were inert. Not only were foreigners, including a Bulgarian, attacked but even Indians were assaulted and Mr J. J. Singh, who was an eye witness to the events, told me that the demonstration took an ugly anti-Indian turn.

All this happened in the name of solidarity with the Arab countries in their quarrel with Israel! The backdrop to this outbreak of violence was provided by inflammatory statements made by the Prime Minister of Kashmir and the President of the State Congress Committee, Mr Mir Kassim, who had made vicious attacks not only on Israel but also on the Western Democracies for their alleged support of Israel, despite the fact that both the USA and Britain had declared their neutrality. The failure of the administration to protect person and property has led to all kinds of wild reports circulating in Srinagar. Only a proper investigation, which is not likely to take place, would disclose whether the disgraceful failure of the Authorities to maintain order was due to connivance on their part or to impotence that comes from the fact that the present Government in Kashmir does not enjoy the support and the confidence of the people.

All this is very deplorable and draws attention to the danger of what might happen if Pakistan were to take advantage of such a situation to intervene once again in Kashmir. The events of June 7 should therefore be treated as a danger signal not only by the Government of India but also by the Indian people as a whole.

There is a dangerous vacuum of leadership. Kashmir badly needs a Government representative of the people.

That this is missing stems from the fact that the General Elections of February 1967 in Kashmir were

neither fair nor free. For one thing, popular leaders like Sheikh Abdullah, Maulvi Afzal Baig and Maulana Masoodi were in detention along with hundreds of others. For another, large number of nomination papers were, on one excuse or another, rejected by Returning Officers who were local officials. Finally, there was a general climate of intimidation. It is common ground among all Opposition Parties, including the Jan Sangh, that the people of Kashmir were denied the fair and free elections available to people in the rest of India last February. The longer the unhealthy state of affairs that has resulted from this fact is allowed to continue, the more difficult it may be for things to mend.

In this context, the appeal recently made by a large number of Members of Parliament belonging to various Parties for the release of Sheikh Abdullah is to be welcomed. The release of Sheikh Abdullah could easily be the first step in a process that might help to mend the present state of affairs. Sheikh Abdullah's release, along with that of his colleagues, could be followed usefully by a Round Table Conference called by the Prime Minister of India in which Sheikh Abdullah, Mr. G. M. Sadiq, and spokesmen of other political elements in Jammu and Kashmir could participate.

All sensible people wish that there should be normal and friendly relations between India and Pakistan in the interest and security of the entire sub-continent. The precise status of Kashmir within the Indian Union and the measure of autonomy it should enjoy have therefore to be worked out between the people of Kashmir and those of the rest of India through their respective representatives. A Round Table Conference such as is here suggested could make a useful contribution to the solution of these problems.

A Conference of this nature could be followed by the dissolution of the present Legislative Assembly and fresh elections in which all Kashmiri elements could participate. Such elections could in turn be followed by the setting up of a new Government in Jammu and Kashmir. In order that such a Government is broad-based and fully representative of the people, it would be desirable that all major elements in the public life of Jammu and Kashmir should be persuaded to join in forming such a government.

While an approach on the lines outlined above would be welcomed by the vast majority of the people

of Kashmir, there is no doubt that a great deal of tact and sweet reasonableness on the part of all concerned would be required to facilitate a peaceful and orderly solution of the Kashmir Problem on these lines.

This is a difficult but worthwhile objective. Not only would it remove the bitterness towards India that flared up in such an ugly manner on June 7 and make the Kashmiri people a happy part of the Indian nation, but it would also deprive Pakistan of any further excuse for interfering in the affairs of Kashmir.

I was glad while in Srinagar to be present at the establishment of a Swatantra Forum which proposes to disseminate Swatantra philosophy, ideals and principals in Kashmir.

While the Swatantra Forum is an autonomous Group and is not a part of the Swatantra Party, it is to be hoped that the work done by the Forum will prepare the ground, in course of time, for the establishment of a branch of the Swatantra Party in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The need has been felt in Kashmir for a

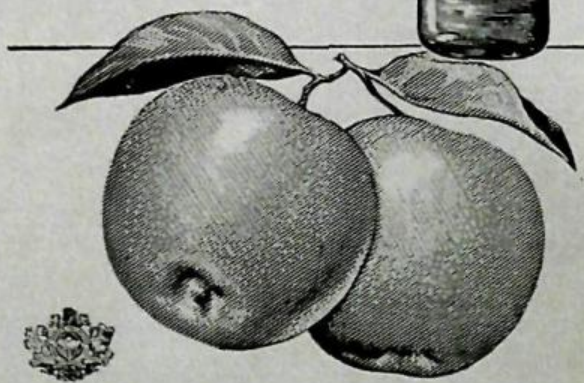
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non-denominational and non-secessionist Party, preferably of an all-India character, and the Swatantra Party could meet this need. It would also provide an extra link or bridge between Kashmir and the rest of India and be one more step towards ending the isolation of Kashmir from the rest of India.

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