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Gun Culture Harms Campaign in Kashmir

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THE extent of poll boycott in the Kashmir Valley and the extent of participation of voters in the Lok Sabha elections will depend on the respective strength of the guns of the two campaigns. It is possible, given the alienation of the people of Kashmir, that a call for boycott by the Hurriyat may influence most of them. But the fact remains that the call is backed by the fear of gun. What is the measure of the influences of the two can only be guessed. Similarly, granted that some disillusionment with militancy has taken place in the recent past, the fact remains that the appeal of the candidates of what are called renegade militants or reformed militants is aided by the gun. A state India Congress leader, Mr Rafiq Sadiq, further alleges that "renegades with guns slung on their shoulders were openly accompanying the Congress candidates in their election campaign".

It is an open secret that the surrendered militants were re-armed and, with the support of the security forces, started operating against their ex-comrades-in-arms. An official spokesman commended their role and described them as friends. This category of militants includes Ikhwan Muslimeen, Muslim Mujahideen, Ikhwan and Khwaja Force.

Wider Target

Their target became wider. Apart from pro-Pak armed militants, many of the unarmed sympathisers too have been victims of the new militants. The Ikhwan Muslimeen chief, Mr Jamshed Shirazi, better known as Kuka Paray, proudly claimed to have liquidated 500 Jamat-i-Islami activists. Later, both groups of JKLF and some Hurriyat leaders were also attacked.

Killing of anybody for his political or religious beliefs is a crime against humanity. It is true that Pak-trained militants have killed for political differences many pro-Indian Muslim leaders and Hindus as also those Muslims who were not pro-India. But their act will acquire justification if the pro-Indian militants also adopt the same policy. To the extent they represent Indian interest, India's image in the Valley and abroad suffers.

Their role will undermine the legitimacy of the elections. They were a major factor in scaring away Farooq Abdullah's National Conference from participating in the electoral battle. Even the state Congress chief, Mr Ghulam Rasool Kar, and its general secretary, Mr Taj Mohiuddin,

protested against the activities of the sponsored militants and threatened to withdraw from elections if they were not disarmed. The state branch of the Communist Party of India made a similar demand when two of its workers were gunned down by them. Aside from demoralising traditional pro-Indian forces, their indiscriminate actions have provided the main cementing force to unite the anti-Indian militants' groups and cover all contradictions in the Hurriyat camp.

Apart from shedding more Kashmiri blood, the gun culture will gradually replace the entire heritage of Kashmiri culture, one of the richest in the sub-continent. Besieged between three sets of guns, of the security forces and two types of militants, both the body and the soul of Kashmir will suffer irreparable damage.

Self-Defeating

It is time each side realised the limitation of gun culture. Beyond a limit, its use becomes self-defeating. Its limitations in the case of pro-Indian militants have been pointed out above. It is no less applicable to anti-Indian militants. Whatever be the reasons which forced Kashmiri youth to take up the gun and whatever achievements may be claimed for it, it has outlived its utility. If the gun alone is to become the final arbiter of the dispute, there is no guarantee that "genuine" militants will triumph over "renegades," not to speak of succeeding in pushing Indian armed forces out of the state.

The Kuka Paray phenomenon is not an outside import into the Valley, but entirely conceived and produced by Delhi. Kuka is a local product and an offspring of militancy which outgrew it and which was exploited by Indian forces, though not very intelligently.

Circumstances may force the self-determination movement in Kashmir to transform itself from a militant to political movement. Mr Yasin Malik's novice experiments with Gandhian methods and the Hurriyat leaders' peaceful march towards U.N. headquarters in Srinagar, aborted by the police, are indications in that direction. Likewise, the response of the government of India will have to be more sophisticated. The eventual battle in Kashmir will have to be fought more with moral and political weapons than war weapons. The present elections in the Valley are inadequately backed by that force.