

Lone is dead, but the Game goes on

K.Balagopal
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The media sometimes does unintended damage by the epithets it hangs on people.

Abdul Gani Lone never called himself a 'moderate', but he was called such by the media. Since truth these days is declared not by anybody's Holy Book but by the Press, Lone died a 'moderate'. It is not my contention that those who killed him would not have done so if he had not been labeled a moderate by the Press; for none of the actors in the Kashmir tragedy (whether State or non-State actors) cares a hoot for anybody's opinion of what they do. But seeing him as a 'moderate' offers a pre-determined explanation for his killing, which – at the least – satisfies our curiosity and inhibits further probing; and – at the worst – justifies the killing in some measure, since is not a 'moderate' one who has compromised on his ideals in one form or the other?

In the Kashmir context, a 'moderate' would be one who has given up the demand of the right of self-determination for Kashmiris. Abdul Gani Lone never did so. In the last couple of years he took the view that Kashmiris would fight for themselves and needed no interference in the name of help from Pakistan; and that the issue could only be resolved politically and not by the gun. He said this in Pakistan where he went to get his son married to the daughter of Amanullah Khan, founder of Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), an organisation committed to the cause of *azaadi*, or Kashmir's independence from both India and Pakistan.

Lone is not the first Kashmiri leader to adopt this position, especially the view that the Kashmir issue cannot be resolved by weapons, but only by political means. The first well known Kashmiri militant to do so was Yasin Malik, the charismatic leader of the JKLF. In jail, he became a convinced Gandhian and disarmed the JKLF, though he did not give up the organisation's aim of *azaadi*. But the Government of India, which loses no occasion to abuse the armed groups, never bothered to initiate any dialogue with this militant-turned-Gandhian. Yasin Malik was never regarded as a moderate, and continued to be an important leader of the Hurriyat Conference. On the other hand, he was the first person to be arrested under POTA!

The second Kashmiri leader to come to the same conclusion was Shabbir Ahmed Shah. As charismatic as Yasin Malik, Shabbir Shah, who spent twenty years in prison, came out convinced that the aspirations of the Kashmiris could only be achieved by political means and that the gun would get Kashmiris no where. There was no dilution of the aims of the Kashmiri struggle, but only a change in the instruments. Yet, the Government of India no more welcomed his change of view than it did Yasin Malik's. His followers in the Democratic Freedom Party have been killed in 'encounters' as routinely as other militants. He was found useful only to save New Delhi's

face when he came forward to talk to K.C.Pant, the emissary sent to the valley with the vague agenda of opening talks with whoever would talk in Kashmir.

What use India would have tried to put Lone to if he had not been killed is uncertain. It is well known that India does not regard the position of Kashmir, declared to be an 'integral part of India', as negotiable. That is why it has never tried to initiate any dialogue with any of the leaders who preferred dialogue over guns. Though India tries to give the world the impression that its objection is to the use of weapons brought from across the border, its real objection is to the idea that Kashmir is 'disputed territory', whose accession to India is disputed by a substantial number of Kashmiris.

Of what use to India is a 'moderate' who will not give up the dispute but will only abjure weapons and Pakistani help? In fact such a 'moderate' makes India more uncomfortable since he reduces the matter to its essence and deprives India of the excuses it offers the world for refusing to resolve the matter politically with Kashmiris. That is why the readiness of Yasin Malik and Shabbir Shah to give up weapons and talk to the Government of India was steadfastly ignored.

But Lone's changed stand came at a different time and in a totally different milieu. The United States, the sole custodian of international law and morality, is breathing down the necks of India and Pakistan, not to resolve the Kashmir issue to the satisfaction of the Kashmiris, but to see that whatever the two countries may do in handling or mishandling it, they will not jeopardise the fight the US has begun against the consequences of its utterly unjust middle east policy. India and Pakistan are manoeuvring their respective games to fit the US game, and India had no doubt hoped to put Lone's change of mind to use.

That sounds shameful? But that is how the Kashmir game has been played by both these countries for the last fifty years. Anyway, somebody thought India should be deprived of the opportunity and put an end to Lone's life. It is reported that Lone's party, the People's League, has elected his son Sajjad Gani Lone in his place as head of the party. From what one knows of him by hearsay, Sajjad Lone is a very articulate, rational and modern person, capable of speaking his mind against both India and Pakistan for their hypocritical attitudes towards Kashmir. Kashmiris, whose very existence is overshadowed by the power-play that goes on in their name, are in great need of leaders of his type. Let us hope he will come good, not for the sake of India, but for the sake of Kashmiris.

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