In Lieu of an Editorial

KASHMIRIYAT UNDER SIEGE

The process of dialogue at the two levels: first, between India and Pakistan, and second, between the separatist Kashmiri political leaders and the representatives of Government of India have generated the hope that Kashmir Valley would soon return to its earlier glory of a 'peaceful heaven'. In the meantime, the general atmosphere in Kashmir indicates encouraging signs of normality at different levels.

In this background, it is painful to note that there has been a resurgence in attacks on the cultural symbols of Kashmir. These symbols represent Kashmir identity, popularly known as *Kashmiriyat.* In the latest such incident, 105 year old Islamia Higher Secondary School was razed in a devastating fire in down-town Srinagar. That petrol and other inflammable substances were used to put the buildings of school on fire, built in typical Kashmiri style of exposed burnt bricks and wood, provides enough evidence that it was an act of sabotage especially meant to destroy this symbol of *Kashmiriyat.*

The Islamia School was set up in the year 1898 by the legendary *Mirwaiz* clan of Kashmir to attract Kashmiri Muslims towards education. The literacy rate in Kashmir at that point of time was abysmally very very low. The school, which was headed by noted Kashmiri Pandit (Hindu) educationists with a large number of non-Muslim teachers, has produced, apart from large sections of educated Kashmiris, political leaders, who rose to legendary fame in the state and outside. The three Chief Ministers of J&K state were educated in this very school. The school was run through a Trust headed by *Mirwaiz* of Kashmir, Maulvi Omar Farooq. It may be recalled that the father of the present *Mirwaiz*, Maulvi Mohammad Farooq, was gunned down by militants with the onset of militancy in Kashmir in 1990. Last month, one of the uncles of the present *Mirwaiz,* Maulvi Mushtaq, was killed while offering Friday prayers in a mosque built by his ancestors in the downtown Srinagar. A militant outfit subsequently accepted the responsibility of the murder of Maulvi Mushtaq through local media.

Mirwaiz, which literally means Chief Priest, is a typical socio-religious institution which is found only in Kashmir. The main task of *Mirwaiz* was to give religious (Islamic) discourses. However, over a period of time, the institution took up educational, social and cultural activities and created a sizeable social base with a large number of followers. An objective study of this institution reveals its secular and humane characteristics. The leaders of this institution, who inherit the headship through

heredity, have preserved, nurtured and perpetuated the spiritual and plural traditions of Kashmir. No wonder that the institution appears to be an anathema to the fundamentalist formations with an extremist mindset in Kashmir. There seems to be a conscious effort to dismantle this institution. The killing of its leaders and the destruction of its infrastructure provides sufficient evidence that there is a conspiracy to destroy the institution. It may be recalled that the other social-religious institutions embodying the local traditions have been targeted by the militants in the past. In this process many a traditional abode of saints and seers, built in traditional Kashmiri architecture, were burnt down. The message was clear that Kashmiri people have to be geared up to adopt new cultural patterns of strict exclusion and intolerance. However, it was resisted by the people.

It may be mentioned that the present *Mirwaiz*, Maulvi Omar, as a part of separatist conglomerate, All Party Hurriyat Conference, is engaged in a dialogue process with the Central government leadership in New Delhi. The targeting of the institution represented by him and annihilation of his kin indicate that conflict entrepreneurs, who have developed a vested interest in the Kashmir conflict, are making all out efforts to coerce the 'pro-peace' elements into silence.

The new challenge in Kashmir invites civil society response in a big way.