

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Jobs can wait... or can they?

Job creation is crucial for peace to return to the Valley, even though it has taken a back seat in the wake of the Pulwama attack

Our key national priority, all agree, is jobs. The pages of this newspaper have recently seen several articles by past and present members of the National Statistical Commission arguing over the accuracy of its own report on employment. The headlines have seen claims of job creation by members of the government matched by taunts of job destruction by the Opposition. Until, last Friday. Since then, our headlines, and even more the TV news, have been dominated by the terrible attack on the CRPF in Pulwama. This column was, until Friday, going to be about Jobs. It is now about Kashmir. Jobs, it seems, can wait.

This column is not about the tragedy of the 40 CRPF men killed in the attack, about young lives cut terribly short, families devastated, and potential squandered. It is also not about the futile search for vengeance, which would be even more tragic in its consequences. And it is definitely not about the high-volume political rhetoric of competitive nationalism. It is about the tragedy that is Kashmir. The Kashmir Valley is, by any yardstick, amongst the most beautiful spots on earth. The magnificence of the scenery in Srinagar, Gulmarg or Pahalgam com-

bined with crafts of wood-carving, carpet weaving, woolen embroidery and papier maché make the state of Jammu and Kashmir a tourist paradise. As a child, Kashmir was our favourite family holiday location — we visited regularly until 1989, and then not at all until 2011, after which we made three visits.



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Some years ago it seemed that Kashmir was limping back to normalcy. Tourists had returned to the Kashmir Valley by the thousand, and this was helping the economy enormously. Employment was being created for the first time in two decades, giving the young some hope for the future. A wonderful Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) initiative in 2011 and 2012, Project Udaan, brought a few hundred MBA and engineering students from Kashmir to visit industries in Mumbai and Pune. While those of us who hosted the students in our firms believe we fascinated the students with our technology and impressed them with the brilliance of our management, they told us what they enjoyed most was visiting shopping malls and multiplexes for the first time in their lives.

And that's the point. The great bulk of the human population wants first and foremost to get on with their lives. They want a decent livelihood,

a satisfying job, and a future for their children that looks better than their own. On our first visit to Srinagar after the first CII student programme in 2012, my brother and I interviewed half a dozen MBA students for jobs with us in Pune. As we chatted with them, the conversation turned to how they saw India, Pakistan, and Kashmir. The answer was strikingly clear: The students all saw their future in India. They did so not because of any moral attraction or legal position dating back to 1947. They did so because of the Indian economy. India was booming at that time, they saw in us a future they wanted to be a part of. Pakistan was just not a consideration. Now, the nationalist in us maybe indignant that they were attracted by so base an instinct as economic opportunity, but the attraction was more real and substantive than anything else. It is the same instinct that has taken the Indian-born population of the United States from under 1 million in 1980 to over 3 million today, the great bulk of whom have become US citizens (and whose economic success funds some of our most nationalist political organisations in India). This powerful instinct connects nationality with economic potential and opportunity.

Those MBA students we interviewed are not typical. Thanks to their education, and the CII initiative, they were the lucky 5 per cent in the Valley with an opportunity that 95 per cent of their less fortunate cousins did not have. But that, surely, is the long term solution for Kashmir. To invest in good schools and colleges in Kashmir that grow the right human capital and teach the right values along the way. To ensure through political rapprochement that a semblance of peace returns to the Valley, and with it hundreds of thousands of tourists that put people in employment. To open our schools and colleges across the country even more to students from Kashmir. And to actively recruit young graduates from Kashmir in our industry. I look forward to an election campaign that focuses on how we will create vibrant opportunity for 95 per cent of all Indians, including those from Kashmir. In the end, actually, jobs can't wait.

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