

Interview :

‘Every Kashmiri leader should think of uniting. That includes separatists’

- Khalida Shañ

Since August 5, 84-year-old Khalida Shah, her son, Muzaffar Shah, and her brother, Mustafa Kamal have not moved out of their house on Srinagar's Maulana Azad road. They say they have been under house arrest since August 5 - the day the Centre stripped Jammu and Kashmir of special status under Article 370 and bifurcated the state into two Union Territories. The Jammu and Kashmir Police have officially denied this.

Khalida Shah is president of the Jammu and Kashmir Awami National Conference. She is the eldest daughter of National Conference founder Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. She is also sisters to Farooq Abdullah and aunt to Omar Abdullah, both former chief ministers of Jammu and Kashmir, both National Conference leaders and both under detention since August 5.

Shah's home continues to be guarded by their personal security officers, provided by the Jammu and Kashmir police. Everyone entering is scrutinised. Only those with prior appointments are allowed inside. A police official deployed there confirmed that the family does not have permission to go out. Scroll.in visited Shah at her home on November 18.

Tell us what happened at your residence on August 5.

Before August 5, there was a lot of uncertainty in the air. We had an idea that something ominous was going to happen. On the morning of August 5, a deputy superintendent of police, in proper uniform, came to our house and told my son Muzaffar [Shah] that we are under house arrest and can't go out. The DSP also told him that if we make any attempt to go out then all of our personal security officers will be suspended for no reason.

But the Jammu and Kashmir Police, in their written submission to the court, has said that you, your son Muzaffar Shah and brother Mustafa Kamal, were “never put under house arrest/wrongful confinement and their right of liberty is neither curbed nor their fundamental rights jeopardised”...

If we are not under house arrest then why don't they allow us to move out? After they [police] submitted their written response in court on October 23, we tried to venture out of our residence but they didn't allow us. Instead, they deployed a heavy contingent of police outside. Everybody is witness to it, including two sitting members of Parliament, Hasnain Masoodi and Mohammad Akbar Lone, who had come to meet us on October 24. A large contingent of media was present. We have video evidence of the police preventing us from moving out.

On November 5, Jammu and Kashmir High Court dismissed the habeas corpus petition challenging the “illegal” detention of you, your son and brother. It said the petitioner was free to take “appropriate remedy available to him under law before an appropriate forum”. What was your reaction?

Frankly speaking, I have totally lost faith in the court. We had approached the court with a hope. A human being thinks that someone may be honest and there might be someone who will side with the truth. But after the high court order on our petition, I was disappointed.

But you are planning to approach the court again?

See, if they had explained the grounds of detentions to us or officially shown us the reasons for our imprisonment, through proper documentation, we would have had no objections. But since they say we are not under detention we have to speak against it. They are outright lying. We can't digest such a blatant lie. That's why we will go to court again.

What do you think the government fears if they allow you to move freely?

I can't say what their apprehension is. But if they think we'll sit silent about the revocation of [special status], that's not going to happen. We have heard that they want us not to hold any press conferences, rallies or protests against the August 5 decision.

Were you ever asked to sign bonds promising not to carry out any political activity?

No. And we don't want to come out by signing any bonds. I have told them to keep us locked up for whatever time they want to or wherever they want us, but we are not among those who will sign bonds for our release.

Lately, there has been talk of a "third front" emerging in Kashmir. Do you think a third front - ideologically different from the BJP but supportive of the revocation of special status and the downgrade to Union Territory status - will be acceptable to Kashmiris?

We have heard that they are trying to buy some people and create a political front. It's another question who will be the Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad [Bakshi, a close aide to Sheikh Abdullah, took over in 1953, with help from Delhi] among them. They are in search of people whom they will make stand for an election. But that will not work. These elections will have no credibility.

After this calamity, we have to be very careful. A mountain has fallen on Kashmir and everyone has a role to rid ourselves of this burden.

Do you think you will be approached to join a potential third front?

I am sure they will try to approach me. In the initial days, when this talk of a third front started doing the rounds, there were a few people who tried to approach us who appeared shady to me. I told Muzaffar [Shah] they are coming here to waste our time, let's stay out of it.

Recently, Lieutenant Governor G C Murmu said there would be elections in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Will you participate?

I will not participate in such an election. First and foremost, we want the restoration of Article 370 in its original shape and structure. Only then can we think participating in elections. They have crushed us.

There are murmurs that Jammu and Kashmir's statehood could be restored and Article 371, whose provisions allow a degree of autonomy to other states, could be applied here. What are your views on that?

Whoever advocates a position like 371 will be considered as a traitor in Kashmir. What do we have to do with statehood? Our demand is 370.

Do you think Kashmiris will keep faith with electoral politics and politicians who are part of it, even though they could not protect the state's special status?

There's no alternative. We have to stand together. When you have to face a daunting task, unity is essential. I am not saying that I am Khalida Shah and they should bow before me. It will not happen on our own.

Does that mean all regional political parties in Kashmir should unite?

That's what we will attempt. If someone is slaughtering you, you have to ensure that it doesn't happen. We have to show courage and do something. I would like to be part of that initiative or lead an initiative which will unite all of us.

Our demand will be to get Article 370 back in its original form and shape, without any change. That will be our demand come what may. And I am hopeful, Inshallah, we will get it.

What about separatists?

Of course, them too. What happened on August 5 concerns each and every Kashmiri.

It has to be a very thoughtful fight and every step has to be taken with care because our rulers are very deceptive. Amit Shah has done a doctorate in lying and you can expect anything from him. It has to be a political fight.

Every Kashmiri leader, wherever he or she is, should think of uniting. That includes separatists as well. When a storm comes, it doesn't discriminate. And as we see, it has already hit each one of us.

The Centre says that the revocation of special status would ensure development in Jammu and Kashmir. Your views?

Kashmir has witnessed massive development in the last 70 years, be it compulsory and free education or in the health sector. More importantly, the land reforms which took place in Jammu and Kashmir have no parallels in history. Nobody in the world has been able to carry out land reforms the way they happened in Kashmir.

We are a thousand times ahead in developmental parameters in comparison to many of India's biggest states. They are teaching people now how to make bathrooms. I call that "potty training". In all my life, I have never seen anyone defecating in the open in Kashmir.

Why don't they first ensure drinking water to all Indians? In Delhi, people sleep in pipes. In Kashmir, nobody's homeless.

What about the Centre's argument that it will end dynastic rule and corruption?

First, BJP is a party that will join any dynasty for power after accusing them of being dynastic.

Dynastic rules are of kings, not common people. Having said that, when all your life, all you hear is politics 24x7, you'll eventually get inclined towards politics. What's wrong with that?

Tell me which state in India doesn't have corruption? Have they got rid of it in those states?

So, what do you think is the reason for revoking special status?

They want to enslave Kashmiri Muslims.

There's a general perception that people in Jammu and Ladakh are happy with the August 5 decision. Do you agree with that assessment?

No. Some people celebrating in Jammu's Raghunath Bazar or some market in Ladakh is not the voice of the entire region. In reality, those two spots don't matter. You have to look at the region as a whole.

Particularly in Jammu, people are worried that their land will be snatched away because nobody has the courage to settle in Kashmir. For Jammuites, the calamity is certain.

In Kashmir, there is fear that the constituency for separatism and militancy might increase...

I don't think so. Whatever wrong is happening in Kashmir is being carried out at the behest of Central government and its agencies.

Take the case of the attack on non-local labourers and truck drivers. At a time when the economic condition of Kashmiris is so bad, how can anyone kill their own truck driver or a labourer? Aren't we further damaging our own economy? That's not possible. All of this is being done so that nobody raises a voice in favour of Kashmir.

Kashmir is known for mass protests. Why do you think there were no widespread street protests against the hollowing out of Article 370?

Before August 5, we had an inkling that New Delhi was up to something. At the all-party meeting that took place in Gupkar in Srinagar in the first week of August, everyone stressed on the fact that whatever the case, people have to be careful.

We had apprehensions that if the people came out on the streets, the government would slaughter 2,000-3,000 in a few minutes. People knew that their lives were in danger if they came out on the streets. And what purpose would it have served if 3,000 people had been killed?

Many in Kashmir now fear demographic change. How real is that fear?

The fear is 100% correct. And whenever those fears are raised, they raise the issue of Kashmiri Pandits. There's no doubt that whatever happened to them was wrong. But, at the same time, Kashmiri Muslims were being slaughtered by Indian forces in various massacres.

It was a very different time and it enveloped everyone. Nobody forced them out deliberately. The 1990s unravelled in Kashmir like a doomsday and Kashmiri Muslims bore the brunt of it. Why doesn't anyone talk about that? Does anyone have an idea about the number of Kashmiri Muslims killed since 1990 or how many houses of Kashmiri Muslims were destroyed?

Do you think leaders like you, part of the old guard which took part in electoral politics, have become vulnerable to violence and public anger?

I have never felt the threat of militants. Even today, I don't have a threat from anyone except the Central government and its agencies. Not only us but entire Kashmir. There's no other threat. Killing of shopkeepers or non-local labourers or burning of non-local trucks in Kashmir is being done by these agencies.

Many argue that even before August 5, electoral politics, dubbed the political ‘mainstream’ in Kashmir, was in crisis. Is the mainstream now under further stress?

I don't think there was any crisis in the mainstream. Those ruling us have a different thinking altogether. For them, the life of an animal is more sacred than a human. In Kashmir, only the BJP is doing politics these days, through the barrel of a gun.

I don't think it will be difficult for the mainstream in Kashmir. Kashmiris are politically conscious beings. They are mentally alert. They know what they have to deal with.

The BJP also says it has resolved the Kashmir issue once and for all...

They are living in a fool's paradise. If the fire in Kashmir had subsided to some extent, they have given it a new spark. And with it, they have brought their own destruction.

Your father rejected the two-nation theory and supported a conditional accession with a secular India. Do you think it was the right decision?

These kinds of assessments are always made in retrospect. At that time, it [accession] was necessary. It was a correct decision under the circumstances of that time.

But with people from the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh at the helm, it's worrying. Minorities don't exist for them. How's that acceptable?

But you still consider yourself Indian?

I am an Indian of that India which my father joined. Not the current India, which doesn't have space for anyone.

In 1953, you saw your father arrested and dismissed from the office of prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir. Do you think the situation post August 5 is different?

When they arrested Sheikh Sahab or my husband in 1953, they didn't go after or harass their families. There's no widespread crackdown. No children were put behind bars or detained in jails outside the state. In the current situation, every Kashmiri has been terrified and suppressed. If BJP had its way, they would kill or burn everyone.

But it was under the Congress that the erosion of Jammu and Kashmir's special status began...

It was the Congress which started it. We have to accept it. But I don't think Congress would have dared to touch Article 370.

These [BJP and RSS] people are outright murderers. They don't care about anything. If a home minister stands up in Parliament and lies to the country then we can imagine what the condition of the rest of the party is.

What do you think needs to be done to ensure peace in Kashmir?

India should just leave us alone and let us be. We will take care of everything on our own.

Are you suggesting that Jammu and Kashmir should no longer be a part of India?

It's they who have brought to that level. Because of what they have done to us, we will prefer going to hell than being with an RSS-ruled India. Who'll want to be with India if they are treated this way? Who'll want to get beaten up every day or be caged?

Everyone's fed up in Kashmir. There's nobody in Kashmir who won't say that Kashmiris aren't being suppressed and oppressed.

Barring a few parties, none of the national parties were vocal in their opposition to the August 5 decision. Were you disappointed?

All the parties should stop thinking of whether their party is small or big. They have to rise above their individual interests and aspirations. If you have to get rid of a big tyrant, all you have to do is put someone at the helm who'll be able to do it. This applies to Kashmir as well.

When it comes to the Congress, they took a very fluid and ambiguous stand. They tried to save themselves. Having said that, I feel, in these circumstances, even if we get a little support from some corner, we should honour that as well.
