

The Chief Minister and the Spy



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An Unlikely Friendship

A.S. Dulat

 juggernaut

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*To Kashmir and Kashmiris, whose debt
I can never repay*

*'Sands are running out. Time is on
nobody's side. We need to move on.'*

– Y.D. Gundevia

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Foreword

This is a fascinating account of Kashmir, written by one who is not merely an expert but, more importantly, whose emotional attachment to Kashmir and with the mercurial Dr Farooq Abdullah is, perhaps, unrivalled. On one level, this is an honest and unvarnished account of the events that have taken place in Kashmir since the 1980s to the present, but what is more fascinating is that it is an insider's account, unrivalled in terms of understanding the forces at work during a very turbulent period.

The author's sympathetic portrayal of Dr Farooq Abdullah as a 'colossus' who dominated the course of many, if not most, events in Kashmir is closest to the truth and reality than most other portrayals. The true merit of the work, though, lies in recognizing the centrality of Dr Abdullah as far as contemporary Kashmir is concerned, and also how critical Dr Abdullah's role was in ensuring that Kashmir did not drift away from India.

Foreword

The author's reference to Dr Abdullah as the tallest of modern-day Kashmiri leaders may again attract criticism from many, but it is the unvarnished truth and is acknowledged by a person who is among the very few in the world who can be considered an expert on Kashmir. The true worth of this book, written in conversational style, is how the narrative brings out a fundamental truth – that notwithstanding several other problems that India has had to face since independence, Kashmir is probably the most complex and enduring.

Written with empathy and sympathy, but 'seeing with the mind's eye', the author, who had a distinguished career in intelligence over several decades, has provided an insightful account of a chaotic phase in Kashmir's modern history. Few accounts of similar situations across the world quite compare with this eponymous work.

– **M.K. Narayanan**, former National Security
Advisor to the Government of India

Preface

*Main bhi mooh mein zubaan rakhta hun,
Koi poochhe ki mudda kya hai.*

(I too have a voice,
If only someone would ask me what I have to say.)

– Ghalib

This is not a biography, but a memoir of my times with Doctor Sahib.

A biography requires detailed research, and many books have been written on Farooq Abdullah. Real answers, in my view, come from conversation: speaking, listening, watching. This is my story of my knowledge of Farooq Abdullah.

Now, I have never ventured an interview with Doctor Sahib. I have listened instead, to him and those around him,

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for close to 37 years, without ever attempting to pry into his privacy or peep into his bedroom. A few years ago, during a dinner at K.M. Singh's house, inevitably, the discussion centred on Kashmir. I was telling KM, 'Narayanan was responsible for sending me to Kashmir.' Just at that moment, Narayanan himself walked in. Having overheard my remark, he looked at me and asked, 'Are you complaining?'

I said, 'Not at all. How can I complain? Kashmir has made me all that I am.' There would never have been a book on Kashmir, least of all this one.

Even thinking of writing this story has been far from easy. Kashmiris are myriad-minded, and yet, if it were not for this quality, this book would be meaningless.

When I began thinking of writing this book, I talked it over with Doctor Sahib. In fact, we spoke about it umpteen times. He never said no, but there was never a clear *yes* – until the summer of 2024, when I told him that I had finally begun writing it.

'Karo na,' he said. (Go ahead.)

It was a response typical of the man. Doctor Sahib could be both reticent and forthcoming, depending on the time, place and his mood. That is why, rather than a biography, I like to think of this as a story, one that has been waiting to be told ever since I first met Doctor Sahib in the winter of 1987.

In October that year, I received a call from my friend and former colleague, M.K. Rathindran, who was at the Intelligence Bureau (IB) headquarters in New Delhi.

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I was posted in Bhopal at the time, and wasn't particularly expecting that call.

'How would you react to a posting to Srinagar?' Rathindran asked without preamble. I was considerably taken aback – not to mention slightly nervous – at the prospect.

The very first time I heard of Farooq Abdullah was when he entered into a political accord with Rajiv Gandhi in December 1986. At the time, I was on an assignment as the security officer for a presidential visit to Belgrade, the capital of erstwhile Yugoslavia. One morning, Romesh Bhandari – the secretary travelling with us – excitedly brought Giani Zail Singh, who was then the president of India, a copy of *The Times of India*. He exclaimed, '*Dekho, Gianiji, ki khabar aayi hai!*' (Look, Gianiji, see what news has come!)

The great news was, of course, the signing of the accord between Farooq and Rajiv. In the corridors of power in New Delhi, this was an idea that had been floating around for a while. Rajiv had long wanted his own man in Kashmir – a man who shared his vision of politics. Farooq was ideal for the task, given how close the Abdullachs and the Gandhis had always been.

Gianiji responded to news of this accord with typical fatalism. 'This is the beginning of the end of Farooq Abdullah,' he observed. But like many others who have tried to estimate where Farooq stands on the great political chessboard that is Kashmir, he was wrong.

Nobody can ever predict the end of Farooq Abdullah – except for the man himself.

