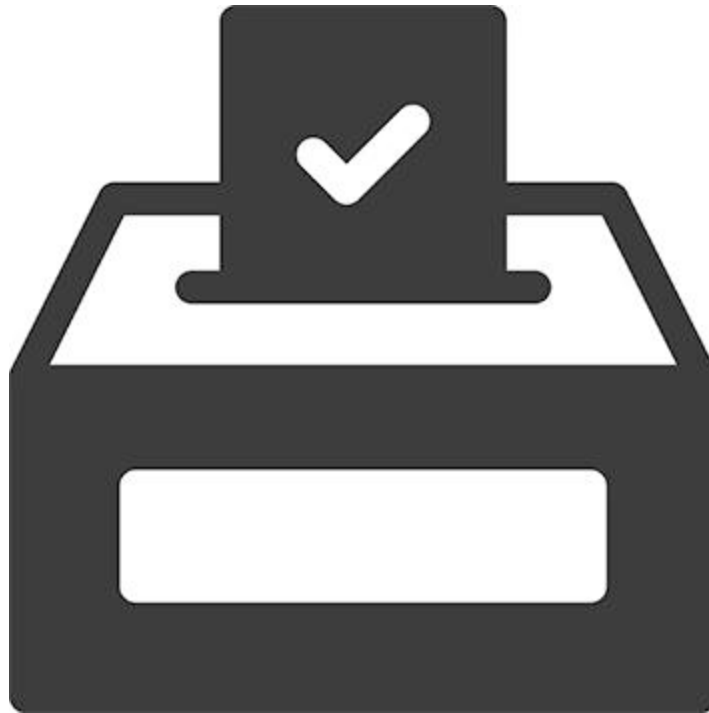


Valley of hope

Kashmir's heartening turn towards electoral politics



The successful completion of three-phase elections in Jammu and Kashmir is a big accomplishment, both for the administration and the people of the border State, the security forces and the Election Commission. That the elections passed off without a single untoward incident as against 170 in the 2014 polls, including 87 on polling days, speaks volumes about the gradual change that is unfolding in the State, especially in the troubled Kashmir Valley.

Right from the first phase in South Kashmir where the militancy-hit villages in Shopian and Kulgam witnessed heightened voter activity, to the just-concluded third phase in which the three districts of Bandipore, Baramulla and Kupwara saw high voter turnout of 67.68 per cent, 61.03 per cent and 66.79 per cent, respectively, the common people's eagerness to participate in the elections was evident. The Jammu region has always been inclined to vote and was no different this time. A measure of the enthusiasm for elections in this (Jammu) region is Phelgowri polling station, located 46 kilometres from Kishtwar district

headquarters at an altitude of 1600 meters, where the voter turnout was an astounding 97.99 per cent.

Another aspect of the changed reality in Kashmir is the altered political landscape wherein the traditional parties — Farooq and Omar Abdullah-led National Conference (NC) and Mehbooba Mufti-led People's Democratic Party (PDP) — are facing a direct challenge from erstwhile underground elements. The outlawed Jamaat-e-Islami, earlier at the forefront of issuing boycott calls for elections, decided to back independent candidates. The controversial Sheikh Abdul Rashid's Awami Ittehad Party (AIP) is contesting 35 seats in the Valley. Rashid has been in jail in Delhi on terror-funding charges but still managed to win the Lok Sabha elections from Baramulla. He was granted bail for the duration of the elections. His party fought the elections in alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami. Both the PDP and the NC, which has an alliance with the Congress, have alleged that the independents and Rashid are "proxies with the protection of the Centre", hinting that the BJP is using them to undercut the NC and PDP.

It is an interesting theory — one that suggests the Valley's return to the normalcy of election-time intrigue and opportunism of mainstream politics. In an interview with this newspaper, the Lieutenant Governor of Jammu and Kashmir Manoj Sinha underlined that "if people, who earlier swore allegiance to Pakistan, are now participating in Indian democratic processes, then it is a welcome step". Indeed, this process of democratisation has been adopted the world over for ushering normalcy in conflict zones, be it Sinn Fein's experiment with the electoral process in Northern Ireland or the journey of former communist guerrilla 'Prachanda' alias Pushpa Kamal Dahal who became Prime Minister of Nepal. Elections in Kashmir should be seen as a victory for Indian democracy.