

## Transcending Faultlines: A Quest for a Culture of Peace

**Ashima Kaul**

### **Abstract**

In Jammu and Kashmir, a state that was theatre of armed violence and counter insurgency operations for over three decades, a women's group – Athwaas (handshake in Kashmiri) took the first steps towards rebuilding trust across communities. This a first person account of the coordinator of Athwaas, offers a glimpse into how the group was brought together, the activities it engaged in, the challenges it encountered and its early successes. The paper was first published in 2001.

### **Author Profile**

**Ashima Kaul** is an independent peace practitioner and journalist, as well as Founder and Managing Director of Yakjah Reconciliation and Development Network, a network of youth, women, and religious leaders in Jammu and Kashmir. From 2000-2010, Ms. Kaul worked with WISCOMP's Athwaas initiative in a consultative capacity. She has directed a documentary film on this initiative, titled Athwaas: The Journey. For her work she was awarded 100 Women Achiever Award by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. She was a Women Peacemakers Fellow at Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, University of San Diego, US.

## Transcending Faultlines: A Quest for a Culture of Peace

Ashima Kaul

The history of peace movements is rife with examples when women as mothers, have crossed the limitations of home and family and entered public space. Risking imprisonment and death by government or armed groups, they have challenged the idea that women are weak, passive victims who are only capable of mourning their fate within the four walls of their homes. They have successfully engaged with commitment, responsibility and efficiency, movements for peace, non-proliferation and nonnuclearisation. And it is remarkable to see that women's political action at the grassroots has had the ability to arrive at politics of understanding and reconciliation, no matter which group, class or religion they belonged to. Many women have done this because they realize that the most important priority in their life is protecting their children and providing them security. In Kashmir, while most women have from time-to-time defied sanctions imposed upon them by hardline groups and exhibited enormous resilience, they have not been able to say anything about the use of violent techniques. Neither have they been able to voice their concerns and problems, nor mobilize themselves. They do so in private but in the absence of democratic spaces, lack of leadership and fear of reprisal, they have not dared to voice their concerns in public. Nevertheless, I sense in them an urgency to initiate a process of rebuilding Kashmir and to bring sanity to their society.

During my intensive interactions with the people in various parts of the State, especially in the Valley; I witnessed the beginning of a certain kind of transformation at the grassroots. People, especially women expressed their desire for guns to be silenced. It was because of these positive indicators that the idea of an interface between women representing different experiences took shape. It was important to let the voices of Kashmiri women reach the mainstream women's groups and agencies that were working in the area of peacebuilding. It was equally important for the women in the Kashmir Valley to listen to their counterparts from Jammu who have also been affected by violence in the region. To me, this seemed to be the most viable democratic means of listening and understanding.

I must admit that it was essentially from Kashmiri women's expressions of despair, frustration and hope that the possibility of an interface between women belonging to different ideologies, religious and social groups and different professions living within the Valley or outside was born. How their concerns and feelings could be articulated and communicated outside the Valley to the rest of India was also a major consideration. When I met Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, the WISCOMP Director, the idea of an interface found resonance as the organization has a vision of bringing women into peace building initiatives. I felt comfortable about WISCOMP's non-sectarian approach, about the

fact that their work focuses on women, conflict and peace with a strong ethical stand on non-violence and the promotion of a culture of peace.

The strength to carry the idea forward and engage in a meaningful exchange was provided by the Kashmiri women themselves. Their intent to resolve the conflict through nonviolent ways and enthusiasm to be a part of the interface encouraged me enormously. Other factor that contributed to the decision was the visible transformation at the grassroots, which I saw in certain pockets of the Valley, for redefining the concepts of *Azadi* (freedom) and *Jihad* (holy war). The women were beginning to identify *Azadi* in terms of their own economic independence (after an intervention by Srinagar branch of the Voluntary Health Association of India, where they began to earn for themselves through Self-help Group scheme) and *Jihad* in terms of their children's education and future.

Once the initial apprehensions and preliminary meetings to finalize the dialogue were over and some groundwork was done, things began to move. We took a strategic decision to include a range of voices, reflecting not only the different experiences of the women but also the diversity of the Kashmiri society. The women who were identified, at some point of time had communicated their desire for addressing one or the other of the following:

- Women's voices to be heard and Kashmiri women deciding their future
- *Azadi* (freedom) or *Panun Kashmir* (Our Kashmir, Movement for Homeland)
- Human Rights violations
- Reconciliation between Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus
- Reconciliation between Kashmiris and the Indian State
- Protection of the minorities
- Rebuilding Kashmir

Those who were already contributing to the welfare and rehabilitation of women were also invited to the dialogue.

## Challenges

I did not expect that women who have lived or continue to live in hostile situations, clouded by prejudice, suspicion, mistrust and fear to suddenly break barriers. Hence the real challenge was to convince the identified participants about the purpose and need for such an initiative.

The first challenge centered on the issue of identity. Some participants were curious about the identity of the other participants at the dialogue. This possibly emerged from the fear of their voice getting diluted. Such apprehensions were addressed by explaining that the dialogue was not intended to be a debating platform, for one party or individual to score points over the other. It was emphasized that this was an opportunity to listen to each other and exchange views. Another apprehension one perceived was the fear of being 'identified'. They were assured that the entire

process will be closed-door and the media will not cover it. Yet another apprehension was whether the initiative was political or not. Once the women were assured that the initiative did not owe affiliation to any political party, they were more willing to participate.

There was scepticism by some participants about how a single dialogue could make a difference in the situation and how it would address the grievances of Kashmiri women. The query indicated that the participants were ready to explore long-term alternative ways of addressing the crisis, and were not too sure how effective a single intervention in isolation would be. Such concerns were allayed by the assurance that the dialogue was the beginning of a meaningful exchange to build sustainable bridges.

Having placed doubts and fears in perspective, it must be added that the women did not adopt hardened positions. After the initial apprehensions were addressed, they were more than willing to participate in the dialogue. Could this be linked to the fact that having lived through the traumatic, violent and hostile situation of an armed conflict, the Kashmiri women have perhaps reached a stage where they are now willing to explore democratic and non-violent ways to address their concerns, engage in free exchange of views and search for alternatives for resolving the conflict? Another major factor, which I believe went in favour of the initiative, was its 'gendered approach'. The fact that the focus was on understanding the conflict from a gender perspective, its impact on women and how they can contribute and strengthen the peace process greatly influenced the women's decision to participate.

There were other problems on the path towards initiating dialogue. Some people in the Valley, as well as in New Delhi wondered about my 'agenda' and 'identity'. Initially it was difficult to cope with the fact that one was perceived as an agent of the 'other' side. It was disturbing to know that my genuine and honest intentions of bringing forth women's voices and facilitating an interface were initially seen through the prism of suspicion. This was a challenge. Nonetheless, I overcame these questions by rising above my identity of an Indian, a Kashmiri and a Hindu. It was easier to connect and relate to each woman by reinforcing my identity as a woman, a mother and a human being. By transcending the faultlines of caste, ethnicity and nationality and by using 'affirmation as a strategy', that is by being on both sides I was able to break through the barriers of class, religion and boundaries within myself as essential prerequisites to building trust and friendship.

### **At the Dialogue**

The presence of diverse women sitting across the table perhaps marked a new chapter in the ongoing discourse on the conflict in Kashmir. Seldom in the 1990s, had Kashmiri women representing such a varied range of social, religious, sectarian, regional, class and age backgrounds interacted with each other (*Breaking the Silence: Women and Kashmir 2001*). However, it is not

so much of what happened at the Dialogue itself but importantly, during the Iftaar, coffee and lunch breaks and in the privacy of the hotel rooms. There was a visible lowering of guard by women who in the last decade have taken certain political positions. Physical proximity and interaction evoked forgotten norms of the old sociability. Some of the women said, “We sat till late in the night, talking and catching up with each other. We do not get the same opportunity back home. For the last couple of years we have stopped going to each other’s place as nobody trusts one another these days”.

Slowly women opened up, albeit briefly and a glimpse of a semblance of the old order was visible during the dialogue. There was excitement and energy in the atmosphere. It certainly seemed like old times.

### **The Follow up**

All Kashmiris, those who live across the Pir Panjal Mountains in the Kashmir Valley and those who live on this side of the mountains in the migrant camps, want peace to return to their ‘*wotan*’ (nation) or ‘*matreybhoomi*’ (motherland). And this perhaps is the only commonality existing between people who otherwise have a plethora of differences – in their ideologies, perceptions, beliefs and notions, regarding the conflict in Kashmir. This sentiment, in fact, was also reflected at the dialogue in Delhi as a majority of women expressed the desire to move beyond the rhetoric of history and attendant, inescapable references to myths and stereotypes. Keeping this desire of the Kashmiri women in mind the dialogue foregrounded the need to move from a confrontationist approach to one, which involved engagement so as to break the ‘cycle of violence’ and the ‘abject silence’.

After this first dialogue, a decision was made to have a Follow Up at Srinagar. The choice of the venue received a positive feedback from the members as one of them remarked firmly, “Nothing could be better than discussing the issues on the soil whose concerns matter to all of us”. The follow up session was held in June 2001. It was followed by a Trauma Counselling workshop.

The follow-up session included two presentations. The first one was by Dr. Paula Banerjee, a North East peace activist who had been instrumental in creating dialogue groups in Nagaland. She had also documented the ascendancy of the Naga Mother's Association (NMA) in Nagaland and was closely working with them for peace in the region. Paula appraised the Kashmiri women about how Naga women mobilized at the grassroots to emerge as the only women’s group in a conflict situation in South Asia to sit at the negotiating table with the Indian Government and negotiate for peace in their region. Kashmiri women who themselves did not want to see any more bloodshed on their soil found a resonance in NMA’s slogan, ‘Shed no more blood’. Paula highlighted the fact that women, many a times in situations of conflict have risen from their position and status of

being victims to move on to become agents of peace as well. She emphasized with reference to NMA, the role women can play in resisting violence and their capacity to break barriers of class, religion and boundaries to come together on issues, which are common to them. Paula also narrated the NMA women's journey to Sri Lanka to meet Sri Lankan women. The initiative was an exploratory process for the NMA representatives to come face-to-face with groups who bore the brunt of ethnic violence in a different context. Especially poignant were the details of a conversation with Visaka, mother of a Sri Lankan soldier who was killed by the LTTE guerrillas. Visaka wanted to meet the LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran. And when asked what she would say to him, Visaka had said, "I will tell him that I am sure if my son had few minutes extra than the man opposite to him, my son most probably would have killed him. Then some other mother would have lost a son. My only request to him would be that whenever they take any soldier as a prisoner, they should at least treat him with dignity." The remarks by the Sri Lankan mother once again reinforced the experiences of how women have invoked 'motherhood' and 'womanhood' as positive tools to engage in peacebuilding.

Paula's profound views, highlighting women's courage and resilience and action for peace in their regions, deeply resonated with Kashmiri women at the dialogue. For, we saw that in the ongoing *Qital* (armed struggle) in the Valley, it is the Kashmiri women who suffer the most. The growing communal polarization in the Kashmir Valley has had an unfortunate fall out in terms of Hindu and Muslim women being unable to relate to one another's trauma and pain. This, despite the fact that the losses and sufferings have been acute on both sides. To move forward, these differences have to be recognized and not brushed under the carpet.

On the other hand, there are similarities which too have to be recognized. And the most pertinent is the way violence has affected women from both the communities. While enumerating NMA's action, Paula's intervention posed questions like: is it possible for Kashmiri Hindu and Muslim women to take their attention away from perceiving and treating each other as adversaries and rise above the parochial differences of religion and ideologies? Can we learn from the experience of the history of peace movements in the world and challenge the violent strategies?

To reflect on these complexities, Kashmiris need time and space. When an average Kashmiri is caught up in a conflict both within and outside it is not easy to follow rationality. Emotions and 'group psyche' play a crucial role and often become stumbling blocks in positive action. At the follow-up session, Shobna Sonpar, a clinical psychologist who has worked in Kashmir on mental health concerns emerging from conflict, spoke about two important issues. One, how to deal with conflict situations. According to her, a victim's perpetual sense of insecurity often leads to distrust and cynicism which further leads to disconnection and isolation. Once this happens doubt starts to overpower hope. "There is a damage. Can I control this? What has happened to me? Am I at the mercy of the situation? What can I do?" These become persistent thoughts. Shobna explained that for the process of normalization it is important to communicate to the person that 'it is okay to feel

the way they are, given the circumstances'. This she explained can help in pulling the victim out of the 'victim syndrome' and cope with the continuing hostile situation.

### **Group Formation and Agenda Setting**

Keeping in view the goal of bringing women to the center of peace building process in Kashmir, my own experiences of such a need at the grassroots and the response of Kashmiri women to the dialogues in New Delhi and Srinagar to bring women's voices to the mainstream, a group was formed at the follow up session in Srinagar. It was named ATHWAAS<sup>1</sup>. The group decided that starting from October 2001, they would travel to various corners of the Valley, the migrant camps and in the hills of Jammu Division (Doda/ Poonch) where militancy had spread in the late 1990s. As the group was fairly representative of the diversity of Kashmir, the purpose of the initiative was to experience the reality of the so-called 'other'. The goal was to see how the process of listening to the 'other' enables each one of us to transform ourselves.

As we embarked on this journey a few imponderables remained, which each one of us in the group had to ponder upon. One, does the growing desire to eschew violence—*dono taraf bandook bandh ho jayey* (the guns should stop from both sides)—stem from a conviction in non-violence as the only way forward or merely from violence fatigue? Second, how ready is each individual in the group to listen to and acknowledge the travails and the pain of the other?

However, this should not make us apprehensive about the utility of the initiative. I believe that the process of experiencing 'the others' reality', can awaken a person to dormant or inherent aspects of one's own personality, aspects which till then prevented us from addressing the larger issues of the conflict. Only through such experience can there be hope for a transformation of 'the self'. If this happens, there is a possibility that the group will be able to transcend barriers and boundaries of community, religion and region. This is where the real challenge lay for the group and for the women of Kashmir. Group dynamism will play an essential role in circumventing this challenge. As peacemakers, women have to constantly negotiate their multiple roles. They have to battle multiple pressures at home and in their communities. It is at these moments that the group members can share experiences and become a source of strength to each other.

Later the group spent time in setting the agenda and methodology for the fieldtrip. It was decided that initially, there would be 4-5 trips covering different situations and areas of conflict in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The purpose of these as described by Neerja Mattoo, one of the members

---

<sup>1</sup> It is a Kashmiri word, which means a handshake or holding of the hands as an expression of individual solidarity, trust and friendship.

was, “the group will be familiarized to and undergo a process of conscientization”. During these trips, ATHWAAS members would focus on the following:

- Listen to a range of voices and find out the aspirations and short term needs of Kashmiri women;
- See if the broken trust between the communities can be re-established and explore possibilities of reconciliation;
- Identify peace constituencies; and
- Articulate the concerns of women to peace negotiators and policy makers.

In order to begin implementation of the agenda, the group identified target areas (districts and villages in the Valley and clusters of migrant camps in Jammu) and groups (village elders, Panchayat members, anganwadi groups, survivors of violence) with whom they would work.

Under the broad parameters of the mentioned agenda, the group met in smaller working groups to decide next steps. The working groups came up with different sets of possibilities which in a sense complemented each other.

The group foresaw that it would engage in the following activities in the future: Networking, Awareness, Reconciliation, and Advocacy. The group members set expectations in terms of their own levels of understanding and **awareness** of the following:

- People who have been affected by political violence
- Sexual assault on women by security forces and militants
- Coping mechanisms of people, the existent support structures and alternatives available
- Areas of action for rehabilitation

The initiative was going to be a two way process and the group decided to chart the changes both ways. It will thus create awareness amongst women about their legal and human rights. This will be done through identified representatives or community leaders at the village level. This will also ensure that the initiative is sustained. In terms of networking, the group gave precedence to the following:

- Build bridges between women at the grassroots and the authorities
- Facilitate interaction between local level bodies with State authorities
- Facilitate networking among women’s groups
- Initiate confidence-building measures, not only within the group but outside in the community as well
- Assist women to establish self help groups

As building trust and faith between communities is one of the focus areas, reconciliation will involve:

- Listening to and identifying the differences
- Recognizing and accepting differences
- Rebuilding trust and friendship



- Building co-operation and understanding
- Developing potential for dialogue

All members felt that advocacy might eventually emerge as an essential element of the process. If and when it does, it might include:

- Articulation of women's issues and concerns to the concerned agencies
- Communicate information to educational institutions and non governmental organizations
- Publicity
- Strengthening the peace constituencies

### **Why the Initiative?**

Many Kashmiris have asked me as to the purpose of this initiative and how it will solve the Kashmir problem? Many have also questioned the feasibility of such an exercise. “How long can we keep on investigating as to what is the problem of women? When will there be an actual intervention at the grassroots?” they ask.

To answer the first question, let me quote what the group consensus was in this regard. They said, “Each one of us, whether she is a high school teacher, a social worker, a student, a government employee or affiliated with some political party, feels claustrophobic in the space we are working in. There is neglect and breakdown of the system in all spheres. Both the public and private life of an individual is caught up in a vicious cycle of violence. In such circumstances, WISCOMP's initiative provides a means to move forward. It lends a meaning to one's life-to do something purposeful. It gives an opportunity to all of us here to contribute, albeit in a micro way, in redeeming the situation.”

And this is where the strength of this initiative lies. It does not look for or aim to provide a set of solutions for the Kashmir issue, but it is a micro effort in supporting and helping groups to create democratic spaces and in enabling the people of Kashmir to search for possible answers. As to the second query about ‘an actual intervention’, I see this initiative as consisting of two strands.

One is exploratory, whereby the revelation of truth and reality as it exists, brings some level of transformation within each of us. Since the reality at the macrocosm of Kashmiri society and at the level of individuals or groups is fractured, how ATHWAAS as a group grapples with it will perhaps be a key factor in the group's ability to break the barriers. Once we are able to achieve some level of transformation within, then it is possible that we can, as agents of peace transcend faultlines and bring a change in perceptions in the minds of Kashmiris, thereby ushering a culture of peace in the region.

Second, the work of ATHWAAS will enable Peace and Conflict Studies researchers, analysts and activists to explore how a constituency of peace develops and what constraints exist.

## **Reconciliation**

Nationality, religion, ethnicity, class and gender are some of the categories through which our experiences and beliefs in life are filtered. Narratives and the kind of images that we construct are largely based on our experiences that are mediated by our identities. Also our perceptions and narratives are often influenced by major incidents in our lives. In Kashmir, the dominant narratives of the majority community – the Muslims, over the last twelve years of militancy have been based on their experiences with the security forces, fundamentalists, militants and the State. Similarly, the narratives of the minority of which Kashmiri Pundits form a large percentage, are based on their exodus, sense of persecution and betrayal. The narratives of these two ethnic and religious groups carry equal measures of bitterness and squalid aspersions on their perceived perpetrators. These narratives overshadow the ones, which were based on their earlier experiences of mutual trust, friendship and understanding. This has led to a discordant relationship between the two. The source of this anxiety and tension, of course is the conflict. Lack of communication and dialogue between the communities after the Kashmiri Pundits left the Valley further built barriers and walls between the two communities. As a result, myths have been reinforced. These in turn have provided a breeding ground for a stereotyped image of ‘the other’. Absence of communication has only fanned and helped reinforce these stereotypes.

Take the example of Kshama and Vijaya Kaul, two Kashmiri Pundit women who were a part of the Dialogue in New Delhi and were also invited to the follow-up. Both of them visited their respective homes during their stay in the Valley. Till then they had reservations (they still do for stereotypes cannot be wiped out in such a short time) about the intentions of the people who they allege have been responsible for the genocide of Kashmiri Pundits in the Valley. But a visit to their old environments and an interaction with their old neighbors and friends seems to have dispelled some of the myths and notions which had come to dominate the mind-set of both the sides during the past decade of distance and distrust. A new set of narratives started to emerge after that.

Kshama and Vijaya, both born and brought up in the Valley were also married there. When militancy started in 1990, both had to ‘forcefully leave’ their land of birth and childhood. While Kshama lost a home and her ‘motherland’, Vijaya also lost her brother who was killed by the militants. So when they went to Srinagar after eleven years and visited their homes it was excruciatingly difficult as well as momentous for both of them. I was with Vijaya when she visited her parent’s house in Jawahar Nagar, a posh civil lines area in Srinagar city and home of her parents-in-law in Maharaj Gunj, a downtown locality and a hotbed of militancy. In Jawahar Nagar, Vijaya’s house had been taken over by the security forces. She was unprepared to see her house

being occupied by soldiers and was unable to muster enough courage to go around her own house. The presence of armed men and the material symbols of their belongings were too intimidating for her.

Vijaya found her house, the neighborhood and the environment alien to what she always remembered it as. However, I noticed that Vijaya was more concerned about her Muslim neighbors and why their windows and a gate (ones facing her house) were closed. To her there was an ambience of sorrow about the closed windows for she always remembered them as windows, which had always remained open. Naturally, Vijaya wanted to meet her neighbors. They were bewildered to see her. The fact that Vijaya was actually there did not sink in for the neighbors for quite a while. There was no semblance of uneasiness between them yet there was a certain restraint. They had all kind of questions and while Vijaya and the lady of the house kept asking about everybody's wellbeing, the man looked at me and said, "*Jab yahan naarey ho gayey to yeh kya kartey? Inko to jana hi tha*" (When the slogans started here what could they do? They had to leave). This acknowledgement in some ways, might have offered some consolation to Vijaya. But what perhaps escaped Vijaya's attention was a remark that the man made. He asked her whether they had given their house on rent to the security forces. Vijaya naturally denied it emphatically as she herself was surprised to see her house in such a state. But the expressions on the man's face told that he did not believe her. It dawned on me at that moment how resentful the Muslim neighbor must feel that their Hindu neighbor had given permission for security forces to move into their house. That explained the closed windows and the door facing Vijaya's house.

The point to be noticed is that the Muslims and Hindus continue to believe what they perceive and think is the truth. They suspect each other's intentions and motives. This aspect (about suspicion and intent) was reiterated when Vijaya visited the house of her in-laws. Expecting it to be ransacked, burnt or forcefully occupied, as many other houses of the Hindus have been during the period of militancy, she was surprised to find the house in exactly the same condition as they had left it. In fact she could not believe that 'the people have not touched it'.

She wanted the locks to be photographed for her to take back as proof that there is after all (at least for her) a reason to begin viewing the picture afresh. Vijaya was also taken aback when she saw that a park next to their house, where her father-in-law often used to sit in the evenings, was full of graves. "*In logon ne bhee kitna kuch khoya hai*", (even these people have lost so much) she observed.

Similarly in the case of Kshama, her visit to her neighborhood was a period of reflection for her. When she came back, she could not help but comment that her neighbors whom she held responsible for her misery and pain for years, actually displayed so much sensitivity. They gifted photographs of her parents to Kshama and took her to the temple where her mother used to go every day. I noticed that Kshama's narratives, which till then had been revolving around her being a victim, had acquired other dimensions of human values and sentiments.

Invariably, after undergoing a ‘process of exchange/interaction’, a new set of narratives emerged. These can now if allowed to grow, to some extent, rebuild the damaged relationship; create conditions for a possible reconciliation or at least provide substantial grounds for a transformation within. This forms one of the premise for the formation of a group where not only the respective communities will revisit their own situations but also each other’s so that new set of narratives are constructed to initiate a process of ‘change in perceptions’, thereby enabling a possibility of developing a renewed relationship of trust, understanding and friendship.

## **Transformation**

After traveling to various areas of the Kashmir Valley and the Jammu Division I have become aware of the aspirations of the people and the reality, as it exists in the entire region. It will be unfair not to admit that I too had my reservations and prejudices. It was only natural on my part to react to the situation in Kashmir as I had only looked at the problem from my point of view. I believed what my mind was asking me to believe. It is only when I met the ‘other’ that many of my perceptions changed. The ‘other’ became a name, a face. Each had a story to tell. I realized that we had differences; in fact, profound ones. But then we had commonalities too. Especially the women’s issues and concerns, I found, were similar all over. Therefore, I often wondered that is it possible to build on our commonalities and recognize the differences and live with dignity with each other. As civilized people, who had a history of co-existence, how long can we continue to humiliate each other? In fact, the journey of my experiences in Kashmir and the migrant camps in Jammu to the Dialogue in New Delhi has enabled me to get a profound insight into the conflict, the dynamics of violent action in Kashmir and in all fairness, the sentiments of the minorities. The journey has also become a source of deeper understanding of issues like the meaning of life and existence. With it has surfaced a notion of restorative rather than retributive justice and reconciliation. How does a Kashmiri move from the prevailing culture of violence to the one, which eschews violence? For it is in an atmosphere of non-aggression that there can be a move towards the process of reconciliation.

Unfortunately, there are no straight answers to arrive at the desired change, for Kashmiris perceive peace in many ways. For those groups and individuals who perceive it as ‘freedom from the Indian rule’, the word evokes defensive reaction. Such groups/individuals construe Peace as India’s intention of continuing its oppressive rule on the Kashmiris. But there is a majority who at this phase of the conflict perceive Peace as ‘respite from violence.’ In such a situation, the most pertinent question is whether this perception of Peace and the definitions attached to it will lead to sustainable Peace?

Peace in Kashmir involves two more factors. One is the need for transformation within and the second is the transformation outside in the socio-political institutions. In the first case, just as more

often than not, whenever there is an internal conflict, involving the ‘self’, an individual begins to identify with the larger conflict in the system outside. It becomes easy for this to happen because there are groups or individuals who—for gaining political or religious strength—manipulate, control, design and execute violent strategies by harnessing people’s popular frustrations and discontent and arousing deep passions and appealing to their religious duty. Therefore, much of external Peace will depend on how much the ‘self’ is at peace. Peace will mean absence of hatred, bitterness, distrust, resentment and revenge. It is only when politics of understanding – ‘my peace cannot be without your peace’ is developed and reinforced - that true freedom will be experienced. This in fact will be the true essence of *Kashmiriyat*. And only when this spirit is nurtured, can there be an outward action for Peace.

Second, Peace will not mean mere absence of physical violence but absence of structural and cultural violence in the system. Only by ensuring democratic freedom, justice, equity and development and by addressing the grievances, issues, concerns and aspirations of people from all social groups, can there be Peace. In this context, the government cannot be absolved of its responsibility and it has to work towards that goal. In fact it is only by adopting inclusive strategies, whereby all groups (government, non-governmental, religious, social, especially women) are allowed to equally participate in deciding and determining the future of Kashmir. This change cannot be achieved overnight. As a peace activist from North East India puts it, ‘Peace is not an event, it is a Process’. To initiate this process, along with rehabilitation, economic and development initiatives by various NGOs, all Kashmiri ethnic groups—Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs—and the people from Jammu and Ladakh will have to make a beginning. It is in this direction that ATHWAAS seeks to search for common ground, create democratic spaces, lend a voice to women’s concerns and explore the notion of a just peace and it is in this context that ATHWAAS has committed itself to a collective journey.

### **Why Women?**

To my mind there are several reasons as to why women should come forward and take an active role in the peace initiatives in Kashmir. For one, they can best articulate the voices of the women. I spoke about this at the follow up session. I found during my investigative trips in the Valley and elsewhere that I could easily approach women, inquire about their problems, speak to them about their perceptions of the war and peace and most importantly relate to them only because I am a woman. On being questioned by a woman, individual or groups came forward to talk less diffidently on issues like rape, molestation, violence at home, oppression not only by agencies or militants but by men within their family and community too, subjects which I am sure would have been difficult to discuss with men.

Second, women have the ability to socialize and mobilize. As such they have been able to resolve family conflicts. They do it so well at home, that if required they can use the same skills to contribute in resolving larger conflicts. Moreover, the entire study of women in armed conflicts is inspiring as it elaborates on how women have cut through cultural specifics to wage peace in regions of violence.

Third, specifically in the context of Kashmir, where women have in the past, in spite of the strong patriarchal system, held both formal and informal positions of power, it would only be justified to involve them in fashioning the future of Kashmir. This will also enable them, not only to create democratic spaces for themselves, which have shrunk considerably in the ongoing violence, but also ensure an engendered and a democratized peace process.