



Mujahid Masood

Kashmiri mujahid Abdul-Hamid Tantray, 43, popularly known as Commander Masood, has found martyrdom in the cause that was dearer to him than his own life. Captured by Indian Special

Operations Group (SOG) on 24 July 2001 from the house of a Jama'at-e-Islami worker, Ghulam Hasan Geelani, he was taken to Pohru, a hamlet about 25 km south of Srinagar and killed in SOG custody the following evening. Indian security forces, who are notorious for custodial killings not just in occupied Jammu and Kashmir, but in India too, said Masood had been killed in a security encounter. A person living just 100m from the place of 'encounter', said he did not hear any exchange of fire, just a burst of guns and silence.

Abdul-Hamid Tantray was born on 5 December 1958 in a South Kashmiri village, Sanghus Kahrawat, in the Kulgam belt. That was a decade after New Delhi had invaded and annexed Jammu and Kashmir as an 'integral part of India'. Tantray went to the local higher secondary school, did his BA from the Degree College, in Anantnag, took a masters degree in Urdu literature and Islamic Studies from the University of Kashmir, and took a job as supervisor in the Handicrafts Department. This is what most colonised people normally do in their situation but colonial normalcy is never normal.

India tried to win young Kashmiris, like Tantray, to its alleged ideals of a liberal secular democracy and to convince them to link their fate with several score millions of Muslims in India. They failed because the Indian secular democracy was neither secular nor democratic. These labels served only as masks to cover the ugly face of a despotic upper caste dictatorship; the more the Kashmiris saw of this face, the more repelled they were by it.

Even if the face had been an attractive one, the people of Jammu and Kashmir would have been unaffected; they had already fallen into a higher love - Pakistan. Their deep attachment to Pakistan was as much romantic as part of their vision of an Islamic country that would lead the Muslim *Ummah* out of the colonial era - notwithstanding the betrayal of that vision by some Pakistanis themselves. The Kashmiris were not giving up their ideal for the sake of the

wayward Pakistanis.

During his student days Tantray had joined the student wing of Jama'at-e-Islami Jammu and Kashmir, the Islami Jami'at-e-Talaba. But as the students grew more impatient and became more radical than what the parent organisation could bear with, the Jama'at disowned and dis-affiliated the Jami'at-e-Talaba. Tantray joined the Jama'at in 1985; at 27, he was probably its youngest member.

By then the Kashmiri youths were becoming too restive to be restrained by anyone or anything. The so-called political process had come to nothing. The Indian occupation was becoming more and more intolerable. The so-called international community, including the Muslim world, had virtually forgotten that the future of Jammu and Kashmir remained to be decided through a UN-organised free and fair plebiscite. The Kashmiris, therefore, decided to break the long stalemate themselves, and they broke it with the barrel of their gun.

Tantray gave up his government job, went across the border, learnt the art of partisan war and joined a newly founded mujahideen group, Al-Badr. He became its chief after the martyrdom of its commander. He then merged Al-Badr with the largest mujahideen group, Hizbul Mujahideen. He was appointed producer in the mujahideen radio, Voice of Kashmir (*Sada-e-Kashmir*), and he effectively silenced the shadowy *Radio Hamara Kashmir* (Our Kashmir Radio) which broadcast a weekly bulletin of 'mujahideen' news. After two years at *Sada-e-Kashmir*, he was appointed head of the Hizb's media cell, but promoted again after about a year as head of the organisation's department of education and training.

In 1995, Masood was made head of Hizbul Mujahideen's main office at Muzaffarabad in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The following year he was deputed again to the Hizb's media cell. His responsibilities so far seemed to have been mainly ideological, educational and media relations.

In 1997, when he was given field responsibility as deputy divisional commander for South Kashmir, he was asked to get back into occupied Kashmir through the Rajouri-Poonch sector. It took him about six weeks to reach South Kashmir, only to be intercepted by Indian forces in the Kousarnag lake area in Pir Panjal woods. Severely wounded in the shoot out, he was taken back to Muzaffarabad where

he spent more than six months in a hospital. After his recovery, he was posted again at the Muzaffarabad office.

Appointed subsequently as deputy chief of operation, Masood was asked to return to occupied Kashmir and assess the mujahideen opinion about a possible ceasefire. This was probably some time in the late 1999. Apparently those who had come up with the 'great idea' had been thinking of timing the ceasefire with the forthcoming visit of then **President Clinton** to the sub-continent.

The story of the ceasefire plan - or plot - remains very obscure though it seems Masood had only been given a task, not the full picture. The main operative happened to be another commander, **Abdul-Majid Dar**, who is believed to have travelled to Srinagar via Dubai, Kathmandu, Dhaka and Delhi. On 24 July 2000 Dar announced a unilateral ceasefire for three months.

The supreme Hizbul Mujahideen commander, **Syed Salahuddin**, owned up the announcement but he gave India a two-week deadline to agree to hold unconditional tripartite talks for the resolution of the dispute. On 3 August 2000, the Indian home secretary, **Kamal Pande**, held a preliminary round of talks with Dar and three other mujahideen, including Masood. Presumably both sides were trying to size each other up but, surprisingly, while the other two commanders had taken care to wear a face mask, Masood had not. Thus the Indians not only obtained his photograph(s), but they must also have been able to tail him from that day.

However, as Indian Prime Minister **A B Vajpayee** insisted that any talk on Kashmir be held within the framework of the Indian constitution, i.e. accepting *a priori* that Jammu and Kashmir was part of India, Salahuddin withdrew the ceasefire on 8 August. But before doing so he had to make sure about the situation in the field. It is believed that Masood played an important role in keeping the command structure intact in spite of the confusion caused by the ceasefire.

Masood had authored about a dozen books and tracts, including *Paradise turned into hell*, *Wa-jahidu fi-Sabilillah* and *Hizb-ul-Mujahideen Eak Nazar Mein*. He was also writing a weekly column in the tabloid *Chattan*. He is survived by an infant daughter and wife. He was a good soldier and a good commander, though not as security conscious as he should have been.

Ahmad Irfan