

KASHMIRIS NEED FRIENDLY APPROACH & NOT BULLETS!**BY****NILOFAR SUHRAWARDY**

Ironically, attempts made to normalise life in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) have paid little attention to worst sufferers of the tension in the state. Let us accept it; military has so far failed to help peace prevail for a considerable length of time. The worst sufferers of this situation are common Kashmiri Muslims. Suspicion prevails about the majority being aligned with militants and of their entertaining a pro-Pakistan approach. Little attention has been paid to understanding the situation from their angle. It must be accepted that each time an innocent Kashmiri Muslim is killed or abused by security forces, the Kashmiri Muslims are bound to display their anger. Besides, this provides ample opportunity for the few militants to try and aggravate the situation further. In certain cases, ordinary Kashmiri Muslims may be forced to participate in protest demonstrations, not as much out of their choice but out of fear of militants. To help Kashmiri Muslims shed this fear it is important to remove the bias entertained against them and the discriminatory approach displayed by security forces. Kashmiri Muslims are caught in a helpless situation, betwixt the possible threat posed by militants as well as the security forces.

The willingness of Kashmiri Muslims to move forward in life is displayed by their exploring job opportunities in the country, including civil services examinations, and a few standing out in sports/games such as kickboxing and cricket. These are a symbolic example of the ones who have not been brainwashed by militants and have also displayed their stand against them. Sadly, their success has not contributed to

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erasing the negative approach held towards Kashmiri Muslims in certain sections.

Besides, the central and state governments need to take certain strong measures to help Kashmiri Muslims and convince them of their support for them. The state has many hospitals but these are not well-equipped. It does not have a blind school. Besides, sports infrastructure needs greater attention. It is important to help Kashmiri Muslims move forward in various fields, provide them security and help alienate them further from militants. Serious efforts are needed to remove the bias entertained against them and help them trust the security forces. The hard fact is that crisis in J&K spells greatest sufferings for ordinary Kashmiri Muslims. Till genuine efforts are made to win their confidence and help them, militants are likely to continue exploiting the situation and create unrest.

INTRODUCTION

Peace continues to elude Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Prospects of situation being brought under control seem extremely limited partly because of almost continual tension between angry people and security forces. In the opinion of General DS Hooda, who recently retired as Northern Army Commander, “Jammu and Kashmir is ours, but we must also underline that people of Kashmir are also ours. If there are genuine grievances, we must address them.” General Hooda also said there is need for a refined and more practical surrender policy to allow Kashmiri youth who have joined terror groups a chance to return to normal life.¹

General Hooda’s comments suggest that “genuine grievances” of people of J&K have not yet been addressed. Rather, they appear to have been ignored. The need to “underline” “people of Kashmir” as “ours” implies that apparently they have yet to be viewed as part of the rest of Indian community. His comments suggest that the J&K crisis cannot be resolved completely till the attitude towards Kashmiri people is changed. Everyone may not agree with his views. It would also be erroneous to assume that there that the entire country does not regard “people of Kashmir” as “ours.” And also that attempts are not being made to attend to their

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grievances. It cannot, however, be ignored that there prevail numerous reservations at several levels regarding the people as well as the state of J&K. The importance of removing bias towards them needs to be underlined. In this paper, this aspect has been focussed upon. Besides, priority needs to be given to understanding the situation from Kashmiri Muslims' angle. Without understanding their approach, it may not be possible to adequately consider the measures needed to resolve the problem. Also, it must be accepted that so far military measures have not been very successful in resolving the crisis in J&K.

MILITANCY AND CRISIS

Each time a civilian is gunned down and/or injured in an attempt to defeat militancy, little else but protest from agitated Kashmiri Muslims can be expected. And this acts as a pointer to a key fact that whatever measures be taken to defeat militancy, the same cannot be expected to succeed in controlling the crisis if they lead to angering Kashmiri civilians. Let us first accept the hard fact that same/similar measures cannot be exercised to quieten agitated civilians and capture/kill militants. Each time, a crisis erupts in J&K, primarily because of various means being used by Kashmiri civilians to show their anger and demonstrating against the state government, in all probability this must be pleasing the militants. It cannot be ignored that peace in the region would hardly ever please militants. Peace also spells that at least for the time being Kashmiri civilians have chosen to remain quiet and pursue their lifestyles without resorting to violence. This also spells a major defeat for militants, though over the years, only for a limited period. For they tend to succeed in having their way, whenever crisis hits J&K and Kashmiri civilians.

BIAS AGAINST KASHMIRI MUSLIMS

Yes, certainly the concerned Indian authorities have the right to claim success or victory each time they manage to capture militants and/or lead to latter's death in an encounter. But unfortunately, limitations of this success/victory surface if and when civilians also get targeted, even though unintentionally. Herein, there is the need to clarify key assumptions held at large about Kashmiri Muslims in general. These

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include their being viewed as pro-Pakistanis, anti-Indians, supporters of militancy and so forth. Clearly, this is suggestive of a bias towards Kashmiri Muslims. Till genuine attempts are made to erase these misconceptions, a bias towards Kashmiri Muslims is likely to prevail, limiting chances of preventing crises arising now and then.

WANI-CASE AND CRISIS

Certainly, it is not an easy job to remove bias of any nature and cannot be accomplished in a short time. But apart from moving in this direction, that is erasing misconceptions held about Kashmiri Muslims, serious efforts have to be made towards ensuring that civilians are not targeted, angered and the situation is not provoked to the stage of a crisis while combating militants. Before elaborating on this issue, perhaps it would be relevant to consider the possible factors that may have led to disturbances in J&K following the killing of Burhan Wani by security forces last year on July 8. Yes, certainly, the forces were doing their duty in trying to round up Wani. It may be noted, civilians do not get angry each and every time that militants are killed in encounters. What were possible factors that apparently agitated them and led the developments to the stage of a crisis?

There are reports of Burhan Wani of being the “architect” of “social-media driven psychological warfare in Kashmir,” because of which, according to a “police source,” he succeeded in influencing more than 60 youths, since 2010 in South Kashmir to join militancy.² Wani himself took to militancy, according to reports, from late 2010. Viewed as “face of new-age militancy in Kashmir,” Wani is believed to “have played a key role in making Hizbul Mujahideen stronger than the Lashkar-e-Taiba in the Valley.”³ However, it would not be totally appropriate to link recent disturbances in Kashmir only with Wani’s death. There have been reports of “protests” in Srinagar when “security forces disallowed a funeral prayer in absentia for slain Lashkar-e-Taiba ‘commander’ Abu Qasim killed in an encounter in South Kashmir.”⁴ Qasim, apparently a Pakistani national, was killed on October 29, 2015. Protests following his death were, however, not as numerous and disturbing as those which surfaced after death of Wani. Some importance should be given to nature

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of Kashmiri Muslims' anger being decided by the identity of the militant killed in the encounter. In addition, note needs to be taken of the nature of Kashmiri Muslims' concern provoking them to protest.

Wani may not have taken to militancy if he was not disturbed by security forces beating Kashmiri Muslims without any reason. As his father, Muzaffar said, "He became a militant not only because he was oppressed but because he saw so many others being oppressed by the army. He couldn't take it anymore."⁵ Wani himself, reportedly, was beaten by security personnel, along with his friend and elder brother Khalid. There are also reports of his brother Khalid having died after being beaten by security forces in 2013. This is supported by J&K government's announcement of a compensation of Rs four lakh and a government job for Wani family. The compensation was announced on December 13, 2016. The state government announced compensation for "families of 106 people who were either killed by security forces accidentally or by militants."⁶

The compensation was probably announced in an attempt to quieten enraged Kashmiris and also control the crisis. But this is also an indicator of a factor that is significantly responsible for Kashmiri Muslims' anger against security forces. The security forces may have some valid point for taking action against certain Kashmiri Muslims. However, if the suspected elements are within their reach, rather than beat them, it would be more appropriate to take them into custody, check the charges against them and proceed to take necessary action legally. The situation would be different if an encounter takes place. Perhaps, some attention should be paid to such cases from Kashmiri Muslims' angle. An "innocent" Kashmiri Muslim is being beaten for no fault of his. This is bound to create a negative impression in their minds about security forces, state government as well the central government. And this can only make the task of brain washing Indian Kashmiri Muslims by militants, whether from across the border or the ones of Indian origin, easier.

With respect to the point made earlier about the difference in reaction of Kashmiri Muslims dependent partly on identity of militants killed in encounters, to a degree, it also seems to be decided by nationality of

militants. It may be noted that though protests did take place after Qasim was killed, but Kashmiri Muslims were not as shaken and angry by his death as they were by that of Burhan Wani. Several interpretations can be drawn from this. One is their support and sympathy for Wani's immediate family, who lived among them. It was further compounded by his elder brother having died earlier after being beaten by security forces. Further, Wani had exercised strategies to win support of Kashmiri Muslims by releasing pictures and videos online. He was viewed as the "poster boy of Hizbul Mujahideen."⁷ Not only was Wani more popular among Kashmiri Muslims than Qasim, but equally important is the reality that they viewed him strongly as one of their own. The fate faced by his family could also be faced by theirs. This also implies that perhaps if Wani and his family did not live in J&K, if he were a militant from across the border, the reaction to his encounter may not have been as severe it seems to have been. It was probably further provoked by security forces' action during funeral prayers for Wani.

HYPE RAISED ABOUT WANI

Wani's decision to turn to militancy cannot be viewed as correct from any angle. The hype raised about his role in brainwashing Kashmiri Muslims in this direction needs to be reconsidered. In fact, though thousands were agitated by the action displayed by security forces, it would be unfair and inappropriate to view each of them having been brainwashed by Wani to turn to militancy. If he had actually succeeded in this exercise, if not thousands, at least a few hundred, influenced by him, would have turned to militancy. But, he did not succeed in having this impact even on one hundred. A report, relying on a police sources, states "Since 2010, he must have influenced more than 60 youths in South Kashmir to join militancy. He received training locally without crossing into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir."⁸ Certainly, influencing even one towards militancy deserves strong condemnation. Yet, equally important is the fact that not even a percent of the Kashmiri Muslims turned to militancy because of Wani's influence. This also indicates that more than 99 percent of Kashmiri Muslims chose not to be brainwashed into turning to militancy. Also, their joining the funeral prayers should not be viewed as a sign of their inclination towards militancy. Several

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factors may have prompted them to hold funeral prayers in absentia and participate in the same. Of these some importance must be given to their regional as well as religious ethics and also empathy for Wani's family. Empathy arose from their familiarity with factors that turned Wani towards militancy.

KASHMIRI MUSLIMS IN A HELPLESS SITUATION

It is equally important to pay some attention to lurking fear among Kashmiri Muslims at large. Certain questions need to be seriously studied. These include whether the fear of militants also prompts them to display aggression when a Kashmiri Muslim, whether a militant or non-militant, is killed by security forces in an encounter or otherwise. Yes, greater attention needs to be paid to the underlying fear among Kashmiri Muslims of the possible damages that may be caused to their life and property by militants if they remain silent at action taken by security forces against them. This fear needs to be removed. It cannot be forgotten that there have been phases when during elections, Kashmiri Muslims have claimed to have cast blank votes. That is they have stood in queues on being compelled by security forces but have chosen not to cast their votes. A number of them claimed this loudly to apparently convince the militants of their "support" for them even though they may not have actually had it. During 1996 assembly elections, the voting behaviour of majority of Kashmiri Muslims was probably most strongly afflicted. It is essential to understand that Kashmiri Muslims have been for decades caught in a helpless situation, fearing the militants and feeling unsafe from the security forces. And till this prevails, crisis is likely to prevail.

KASHMIRI MUSLIMS SHOULD NOT BE VIEWED AS MILITANTS

Normalcy is least likely to be restored in J&K without erasing apprehensions, insecurity, fear and also doubts held in Kashmiri Muslims' mind about security forces and *vice versa*. Let us accept it; most Kashmiri Muslims are not as willing to be drawn towards joining militant ranks as they are assumed to be. But till this suspicion remains about them, prospects of their being targeted by security forces remain strong.

Greater importance, apparently, needs to be given to increasing trend displayed by Kashmiri Muslims to opt for government jobs. This also supports the point about majority being unwilling join militant ranks. What else is indicated by Shah Faesal topping the civil services examination in 2009? Though he is the first Kashmiri to top civil services examination, he is not the first to opt for this. The first to succeed in making to top ranks was Mohammad Shafi Pandit, who cleared the exam in 1969. It may be noted, the news of Kashmiri Muslims joining civil services hits headlines only when they secure top positions. This should not be viewed as a sign of only these Kashmiri Muslims trying for these examinations. The successful candidates are only a limited percentage of Kashmiri Muslims who tried, but failed to clear the civil services examinations. This point is supported by “euphoria” witnessed in Kashmir when Shah Faesal topped. If each and every Kashmiri Muslim was inclined towards militancy, they would not have probably welcomed Faesal’s success. Nor would the state have seen more Kashmiri Muslims listed as successful candidates in subsequent years. Ten candidates cleared the exam in 2015, with Athar Aamir-ul- Shafi Khan bagging the second position.

The point made earlier about the fear of militants prevailing among Kashmiri Muslims is supported by Shah Faesal’s case. His father was killed by militants in 2002.⁹ Had his father chosen not to stand up against militants, he may not have been killed by them. The fear of being targeted prevents most Kashmiri Muslims from standing up against them. Please note, Wani’s rise as a militant and Faesal’s success in civil services examination can be traced to the same period when insurgency still marked life in J&K. Wani was driven towards militancy because of attitude of security forces. In contrast, Faesal entertained a negative attitude towards militancy and was keen for the welfare of the people of J&K. Faesal was encouraged towards this line by his family members and other Kashmiri Muslims who had succeeded in their respective professions. A priority of Faesal is to encourage more Kashmiris to opt for civil services. Interestingly, a rudimentary survey indicates that popularity and success achieved by Faesal in influencing young Kashmiri youth exceeds that gained by Wani. Besides, the success of latter may

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also be viewed as of temporary, passing phase, which cannot be expected to last forever after the death of Wani.

Certainly, Faesal is not the only Kashmiri Muslim, who is inspiring Kashmiri youth and also making efforts to train them for civil services examinations. Recent past has been witness to Kashmiri Muslims being trained in Delhi by institutes set up to provide coaching for civil services examinations. Please note, the hype raised about Wani has not deterred Kashmiri Muslims from preparing for civil services examinations. In these circumstances, if they are viewed as aligned with militants as well as having a pro-Pakistan attitude, their normal life is bound to be badly affected by negative news circulated about them. Even Shah Faesal has not been spared by manufactured news targeting his image. This refers to a “photo” of him standing next to bullet ridden body of Wani aired by some TV channels. Faesal blamed the “national media” for comparing him with Wani through its “sadistic propaganda.” He wrote on his Facebook page, “By juxtaposing my photos with the images of a slain militant commander, a section of national media has once again fallen back upon its conventional savagery that cashes on falsehoods, divides people and creates more hatred.” Threatening to resign, if this “nonsense” continued, Faesal wrote, when Kashmir was “mourning its dead, the propaganda and provocation being dished out from red and blue newsrooms is breeding more alienation and anger in Kashmir than what (the) Indian state can manage.”¹⁰

Whoever may be responsible for “juxtaposing” Faesal’s photo with that of Wani, apparently it was done to malign former’s image and also spread “news” about his linkage with militants. This is strongly suggestive of the bias that prevails about Kashmiri Muslims. The bias is responsible for entertaining wrong perceptions about their “ties” with militants, attitude towards Pakistan and India. A strong approach is needed to change this. In the opinion of Mohamed Shafi Pandit, “It is time to treat Kashmiris as citizens and not subjects.” He and his family were not spared by militants, who tried to assassinate him and repeatedly threatened him in 1990s. He is among the majority of Kashmiri Muslims who have not succumbed to the command of militants. Yet, there prevails the tendency to regard majority as pro-militants. In his opinion, “The

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stone-pelters are young, angry Kashmiri Muslims. Delhi does not seem to be listening, and its stand is that it is being promoted by those who are paid agents of Lashkar-e-Toiba or Pakistan's ISI. There could be some mischief-makers in the crowd, but paid agents alone could not have produced such sustained mass demonstrations. They would have been limited to certain areas and for a while only. These protests reflect general angst and the anguish of Kashmiri Muslims against the continuous humiliation, death and destruction suffered by them.”¹¹

Let us accept the fact and give credit to Kashmiri Muslims who are standing against militancy. But let us also take note of the fact that most of these are well settled, financially and professionally, with the option of being provided security against militants trying to target them. At the same time, the strong reasons they have to be dissatisfied with the attitude of rest of the country towards Kashmiri Muslims, including the central government and national media, towards them cannot be ignored. Mohamed Shafi Pandit and Shah Faesal can afford to express the same openly as well as display the frustration and desperation that it spells for Kashmiri Muslims as a whole. The common Kashmiri Muslims cannot take the risk of doing the same and be caught midst the firing of militants and security forces. Their anger is apparently compounded by the losses such crises spell for them. In addition to the number killed, injured, economic losses as well as future insecurity- economic, social and political, of the majority cannot be ignored.

ECONOMIC LOSS

Economic loss suffered by the state as a whole may be viewed as an indicator of economic grievances being faced by the people. The Economic Survey-2016 released by People's Democratic Party-Bhartiya Janata Party (PDP-BJP) coalition government states that J&K is trailing economically behind Himachal Pradesh (HP), a state which is half its size in population and geographical area. “The tourist inflow to J&K for 2015 stood at 92.03 lakh tourists whereas during 2014 it stood at 95.25 lakh. On the contrary, tourist inflow to HP for 2015 and 2014 stood at 175.31 lakh and 163.14 lakh tourists respectively. The tourist inflow to J&K is less by 83.28 lakh tourists in 2015 and

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67.89 lakh tourists in 2014 despite the fact that J&K especially Kashmir has tremendous scenic beauty and tourist spots than that of HP,” according to the report. Hydel power potential is estimated at 20,000 MWs each in both states. The report states, “HP has harnessed capacity/projects to the extent of 6370 MW (32% of estimated potential) while J&K has exploited 3263.46 MW (16% of estimated potential) only.” Large and medium scale industries in J&K are only 86 with employment of 19314 persons as against 503 such industries with employment of 60908 persons in Himachal Pradesh, according to the report.¹²

FRIENDLY APPROACH NEEDED

Crisis in J&K probably provides opportunities for militants to attract Kashmiri Muslims to their fold and spell problems for life in state. Adding grievances to their life is not what any Kashmiri Muslims can be expected to welcome. Bullets from any source cannot be of much help in ending the crisis. If India expects more Kashmiri Muslims to come forward and openly display their stand against militants, the central and state governments need to take steps which can convince them about the credibility of the same. More attention needs to be paid to the core fact that whenever innocent Kashmiri Muslims are killed or injured by security forces, the former’s distrust in the latter only increases. And so does their desperation and frustration for they have been targeted, with no proof of their being associated with militants. There has to be a full stop to such exercises. Importance has to be given to a friendly approach them. Usage of force, bullets, pellets and so forth is equivalent to treating them as enemies. How can they be won over by being treated as enemies?

Constitutionally and diplomatically, from the Indian perspective, greater importance needs to be given addressing their grievances to solve them. It is crucial to treat them at par with other citizens and not alienate them. There is the urgent need to upgrade their medical facilities. Certainly, the state has second highest number of hospitals (2,812) in the country, next to Rajasthan (3,145). Yet, these are not equipped with necessary medical facilities and sufficient number of

doctors. Not surprisingly, hundreds of patients are forced to seek medical aid from other parts of the country.¹³ Reports of a number of people, including children, being partially or fully blinded by use of pellet guns need to be given greater importance. The state doesn't have a school for blind. At present, the state government is "contemplating to set up a blind school for hundreds of pellet victims of Kashmir who were partially or fully blinded by the pellet guns of security forces during the pro-freedom uprising of 2016." Two buildings have been identified for the blind school where pellet victims will be accommodated besides others including those who are born blind, according to Director Social Welfare Hashmat Ali.¹⁴

Please note, the injured are seeking medical aid from other parts of India. This also defies the perception held about their pro-Pakistan inclination. The same is supported by their seeking job opportunities in J&K and elsewhere in the country. In addition to providing civilians adequate compensation, efforts should be made to ensure adequate means of livelihood for them. If substantial efforts are made to involve people in training programmes which can provide employment opportunities for them, probability of their participating in demonstrations is likely to decrease. Efforts should be made to involve men and women in rural as well as urban areas. Adequate attention needs to be given to increase involvement of Kashmiri Muslims in sports and games like cricket.

Just as Kashmiri Muslims are moving forward to give civil services examinations, their interest is also contributing to their making their mark in the field of sports. It is important to take note that despite inadequate or virtually no aid from the government, Kashmiri Muslims have succeeded in these fields. Recent past has been witness to eight-year old Tajamul Islam creating history by winning the gold medal at the World Kickboxing Championship in Italy. In the sub-junior category, she defeated her rival from United States to become the world champion, last year. On her success, she said, "I want to thank all the people who supported me, feeling proud that I won gold for India."¹⁵ At the same time, she is also extremely critical of the lack of sports facilities in J&K. Earlier this year in March, on directions of Chief Minister

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Mehbooba Mufti, Bandipore-based Ali Academy in North Kashmir, from where Tajamul has been trained, was granted Rs 10 lakh for upgradation of sports infrastructure.¹⁶

Cricketer Parvez Rasool has also been extremely critical of lack of sports infrastructure in J&K. He is the first cricketer from Kashmir to play for India. The state does not have a proper stadium. The state is committed to provide all support in building quality sports infrastructure in the state, according to Secretary Sports Council, Waheed-ur-Rehman Parra. “The Sports Council encourages every such initiative that works for betterment of sports in J&K,” he said. The government is also considering request for construction of Indoor Sports Stadium at Bandipora.¹⁷ However appealing these considerations and commitments may be, they need to be implemented to convince Kashmiri Muslims about the government’s concern for their development.

CONCLUSION

Given the opinion held in general by most Kashmiri Muslims about BJP entertaining an anti-Muslim attitude, People’s Democratic Party (PDP)’s alliance with it to form the present state government has not been welcomed by them. They are apprehensive that BJP is least likely to make any effort for their development and may take actions adding to their grievances. In a nutshell, if the present government does not make serious efforts to adopt a friendly approach, to implement the few measures it is considering, this will contribute only to further alienating and isolating the Kashmiri Muslims. These will add to their suspicions held about approach of BJP towards them, increasing their frustration and desperation. This does not suggest that their inclination towards militancy will increase. However, it will definitely encourage militants to try and entrap Kashmiri Muslims in their fold. If the government is seriously interested in ending crisis, it has to take steps towards encouraging a friendly approach towards Kashmiri Muslims and move forward to implement measures required for their development. These steps will also contribute to their integration in the rest of Indian society.

Success displayed by Shah Faesal, Parvez Rasool, Tajamul Islam and other Kashmiri Muslims is also symbolic of their anti-militancy approach. Yet, at the same time, most among these are not happy with the negative approach entertained towards them as well as insufficient steps taken by government to ensure implementation of measures for their development. Let us accept it, bullets from any quarter are not going to end crisis in J&K. But they will only add to Kashmiri Muslims' grievances, aiding the militants. The key notion is to further the distance between militants and Kashmiri Muslims. Priority should be given to redress helplessness of Kashmiri Muslims failing to stand up against former out of fear. Their confidence needs to be won by providing them with needed medical facilities, opening various career opportunities for them and other measures. The situation needs to be viewed not simply as crisis in J&K, but that afflicting the majority because of their facing threat from militants as well as security forces compounded by the bias held against them. The first step towards ending tension in J&K needs to focus on not viewing Kashmiri Muslims as enemies.

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Nilofar Suhrawardy is a well-known freelance journalist who has, at different periods, written extensively for national papers. Her book *Ayodhya Without the Communal Stamp, In the Name of Indian Secularism*, was listed as the sixth-most popular book on the website.

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