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Maulana Masood Azhar: Jaish-e-Mohammed

Harinder Baweja

India discovered him at 2 p.m. on 1 October 2001, soon after a Tata Sumo rammed the heavily guarded gate of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly in Srinagar. The thirty-nine mangled bodies strewn around the Assembly compound bore the unmistakable stamp of pan-Islamic jihad. The perpetrator: Maulana Masood Azhar, chief of the Jaish-e-Mohammed or the Army of the Prophet.

As for the Maulana, he had begun to discover himself fairly early on. Soon after he had cleared his Class VIII exams, in fact, when Mufti Sayeed, a friend of his father's persuaded him to let the young Azhar join the Jamia Islamia at the Binori mosque in Karachi.

The Mufti was one of the teachers at the Jamia Islamia and it was no ordinary school for Azhar soon found himself in the company of students who were under the influence of leaders of the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM), a militant organisation that was then active in Afghanistan and later extended its activities to Kashmir. The HUM leaders – it was no coincidence – had also been students at the same madrasa in the Binori mosque complex.

Azhar passed the *almia* (Islamic) examination with distinction in 1989 when he was 21. At an age when most youth are plotting their professional future, Azhar had already made up his mind on what he would do. He had been deeply influenced by the HUM leaders and by his fellow students who were not just Pakistanis but Arab, Sudanese and Bangladeshi nationals. Some of them had already departed for neighbouring Afghanistan and soon after he met Maulana Fazlur Rahman Khalil, the HUM chief, Azhar too was on his way for what he called *tarbiat* or training.

Sent to Yuvar, a training camp in Afghanistan, Azhar soon found that while he'd topped the *almia* in Karachi, he was having

great difficulty when it came to obstacle races and weapons. The stodgy 5 ft 3" figure could not complete the mandatory 40-day training programme. He admitted later to his interrogators in Srinagar, where he was arrested in 1994, that this was 'because of his poor physique'.

He returned to the Jamia Islamia from Afghanistan and took up a job as a teacher and his 'literary skills' – knowledge of Islam and jihad – soon saw him bringing out a magazine called *Sada-i-Mujahid* or *Knock of the Mujahideen*. It carried articles on HUM's activities and the war in Afghanistan and free copies of it were distributed after Friday prayers and at functions held by the Harkat. This was in 1989 and a year later, the Harkat had opened offices in various cities across Pakistan, including Hyderabad, Gujranwala, Lahore and Islamabad. A recruitment drive was also launched and the qualifications were simple: only those with beards and only those who had been trained in Afghanistan.

Khalil, the HUM chief, found that Azhar was not only qualified to bring out the magazine but also that he was a skilled orator and so started a department of motivation under the Maulana's tutelage. It were these skills that were to play a lethal role in the insurgency that first started as an indigenous movement in Kashmir in 1989.

The Maulana may never have turned his attention to India or Kashmir – a family member revealed – were it not for the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya on 6 December 1992. Till then, he was happy playing the role of a 'journalist' through *Sada-i-Mujahid*. What the Maulana was doing was spreading the message of jihad and collecting funds for his comrades in Afghanistan. Impressed with his skilled oratory and his ability to procure donations through his speeches, Khalil encouraged the Maulana to undertake foreign tours for this purpose.

Azhar, who first obtained his passport under his own name, was soon on his way to Saudi Arabia on a Haj pilgrimage and managed to collect Rs 300,000 in a matter of a few days. He extolled the virtues of jihad and the role of the HUM in other countries too and soon found himself in Zambia where he stayed for a month, occupying himself with giving speeches in mosques. By the end of his trip, Azhar had again collected Rs 2.2 million

in the name of religious education. Similarly, a trip to Birmingham, Nottingham, Leicester and London in the UK saw him expand his network of contacts and his financial kitty.

The first point of conflict with the Pakistani establishment – which till then was quite comfortable with the role of the HUM in Afghanistan – came after the Soviet withdrawal. Due to the international pressure being mounted on Pakistan to rein in the jihadis, the establishment was forced to make a few arrests. The approximately 500 arrested militants were then pressurised to leave Pakistani soil for the UAE but the fear of persecution saw them make their way to Somalia via Sudan where they joined the ranks of the Ittehad-e-Islami.

The militants kept in touch with the HUM and wrote back to say that the Pakistani army, deployed in aid of the United Nations, was working against the interests of Islam by targeting the Ittehad-e-Islami cadre. This is when the confrontation between Khalil and the Pakistani establishment first started. The HUM chief asked Azhar to contact senior Pakistani journalists and persuade them to send a team of reporters to Kenya where top leaders of the Ittehad group were staying. Azhar managed to do that and with his chief, Khalil, accompanied the team to Nairobi. They returned to Pakistan a week later to write lengthy articles in various journals which, they were happy to find, embarrassed the government.

Azhar was now asked to go to 'Azad Kashmir' to meet Sajjad Afghani. Sajjad was a sharpshooter who had performed bravely against the Russians and Azhar had first met him at the training camp in Yuvar. The timing of this meeting was important: he had been called in January 1993, a month after the Babri Masjid demolition. The purpose: to aid the Kashmiri mujahideen in their struggle against 'Hindu India'. While in Muzaffarabad, Azhar met Maulana Farooq Kashmiri, the chief of operations for 'Indian-held Kashmir', and together they toured various places in 'Azad Kashmir' addressing public meetings in which they spoke of the need to 'liberate' Kashmir from Indian occupation. On the same tour, Sajjad Afghani was asked to take over the command of all military operations in Kashmir. He was to get there by first going to Bangladesh since the passes along the Line of Control were

covered with high walls of snow. Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital, was chosen for another reason. Maulvi Kalimullah, a schoolmate of Azhar's at the Binori mosque, was now running a madrasa in Dhaka and would be there to help Sajjad cross the border into India. Azhar flew to Dhaka with Sajjad and returned to Karachi while Sajjad was launched into India to give the Kashmiri mujahideen a fighting edge.

A year later it was Azhar's turn to go to Kashmir to further boost the morale of the 'freedom fighters'. Azhar flew to Dhaka and then to Delhi, this time on a Portuguese passport. The person who landed in Delhi's Indira Gandhi International airport in the early hours of the morning of 29 January 1994 had changed his name from Maulana Masood Azhar to Adam Issa. The immigration officer who inspected Azhar alias Issa's passport commented that he didn't look Portuguese but quickly stamped the passport when told that he was of Gujarati origin.

Azhar hailed a taxi, not to some remote guesthouse, but to the government-owned Ashoka Hotel, where he checked in for the night. His life was too precious to risk an arrest, so Azhar had been instructed to stay at an expensive hotel. He had also been asked to call a carpet dealer. The next morning he had two visitors knocking on his door: the carpet dealer and the chief of operations of the Jammu region. But it was not Srinagar that he wanted to head for. He had another destination in mind. And so it was Lucknow that he went to and from there to Ayodhya.

His visit to the disputed site where all that was left of the Babri Masjid was rubble is an experience best narrated in the Maulana's own words: 'I remember the day I was standing there. In front of me lay the Babri Masjid in ruins. Angrily, I was stamping the ground, squashing the Indian soil with my shoes and saying, "O Babri Masjid, we are ashamed, O Babri Masjid, we are sorry . . . you were a sign of our glorious past and we will not rest till we restore you to your former glory."' These lines, in fact, became part of all his speeches, words that helped indoctrinate and motivate the Harkat cadre. But before he could reach Srinagar and start doing that, Azhar visited various Muslim localities in India where his speeches were recorded and cassettes distributed.

Azhar had come a long way indeed. Born in Bahawalpur on 10 July 1968, where he lived for the first ten years with six sisters and four brothers, Azhar was just another child, being brought up in a lower middle class home. Allah Bakhsh Shabir, his father, taught at a local school and was a small-time entrepreneur who ran a small dairy and poultry farm. He was also an extremely religious man and heads of various madrasas were an inner part of his contact circle. Mufti Sayeed, the teacher at the Jamia Islamia at Karachi's Binori mosque, was one such friend and this is how Azhar made his way from Bahawalpur in Punjab to the madrasa in Karachi.

Religious indoctrination from a young age and the fact that Khalil, the Harkat chief, spotted him at Binori – from where the organisation was recruiting cadres for Pakistan – ensured Azhar's entry into the battlefield of jihad. Being a trusted aide of Khalil, it was only a matter of time before Azhar embarked on a journey to Srinagar to motivate the Kashmiri 'freedom fighters'. He looked forward to the trip for another reason: he would be meeting Sajjad Afghani with whom he had developed a close bond. So, from Ayodhya, Azhar came back to Delhi and took a flight to Srinagar. Escorted straight from the airport to a mosque in the city's downtown area, Azhar was asked to wait for Sajjad Afghani who would come as soon as it was possible for him to evade the security dragnet and find his way there safely.

Sajjad and Azhar were too precious for the cause and had been directed not to unduly take any risks. Besides, Azhar had come there for an important mission. Apart from motivating the cadre, he also had to ensure that the mujahideen belonging to the two separate groups of Harkat-ul-Jehad-e-Islami and the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen merge under the new name of Harkat-ul-Ansar and work under one umbrella. These instructions had been relayed some months ago but back in Pakistan, Khalil had not received any confirmation of the merger. Few dared disobey Azhar. He had by then become respected as a great Islamic ideologue who had travelled through 25 different countries with the sole aim of propagating jihad and collecting funds for this 'holy' mission.

Word had already reached Srinagar and the neighbouring

district of Anantnag that the Maulana had arrived and that he would soon be visiting them and addressing them on their cause. Sajjad joined him at the mosque in Lal Bazaar that evening and both of them set off for a remote village in Anantnag, about 70 km from Srinagar. The meeting or *majlis-e-jihad* that took place here is best described in Azhar's own words: 'About 25 armed mujahideen were gathered at a small house in the village. They greeted us warmly and soon a religious discourse began. The young men's chests were decorated with magazines and within them burned the flame of courage and bravery. All of them were listening to me intently and their AK-47s lay cradled in their laps like children in their mother's care. Some of them also had carbines and rocket launchers that they must have seized from the Army. Three or four of our soldiers were guarding the door downstairs and they had wanted to join us too but then duty came first and they had to contend with listening to me over their wireless sets. After the *majlis* ended, my brothers stretched out on the floor and I decided to go down and join the mujahideen who were on guard duty. Before I did that, I picked up a Kalashnikov and after feeling the weapon in my hands, found that it was ready to talk to the *mushrikeen* (enemy). The bullet was in the chamber and it was ready to fire and I felt ecstatic at the thought of enemy soldiers falling . . . my joy knew no bounds as I held the loaded gun in my hands.'

Azhar spent two days in the Valley speaking to the mujahideen and was looking forward to the following day which was a Friday because Sajjad wanted him to deliver prayers at the Jama Masjid. Azhar's joy at the prospect of meeting his fellow brothers was, however, short lived for that Friday – 10 February 1994 – Sajjad and he were arrested after their car broke down on the way to the mosque and they were trying to hail an auto rickshaw.

Their arrests came as a big blow to Khalil and the Pakistan establishment that had embarked on the new strategy of pushing foreign mercenaries into Kashmir to give the militants a cutting edge. The Indian Army had nabbed the two most important people who were supposed to inject jihadi fervour into an insurgency, which had initially started as a battle for 'independence'.

It was soon after his arrest that this writer met Azhar. His behaviour in custody then, in February 1994, was no different from the kind of treatment meted out to me in Kabul by the Taliban in October 1996. Azhar refused to look me in the eye for religion forbade eye contact with women. It didn't matter at all that the Indian Army surrounded him or that he was in captivity. He had no problems, rather, no reservations narrating what he had done in the two days that he had spent in the Valley. He was fortunate, I remember him telling me, that Allah had chosen him for what he called an Islamic duty and his only regret was that he had been captured and not killed. Had he been tortured, I asked him. Driven by rage – he broke his own rule – and looking me straight in the eye said sarcastically, 'No, the Army has been showering me with petals.'

He spent months after that in the hands of various interrogating officials drawn from different agencies like the Intelligence Bureau and the Research and Analysis Wing. The interrogating officer for Kashmir's counter intelligence wing, after several days trying to break Azhar, interestingly noted in his report that 'he (Azhar) was not himself involved in any subversive activity in Kashmir.'

Unknown to his interrogators, the Pakistan establishment was devising desperate strategies to secure the Maulana's release. The first plan of action was put into place within a few months of his arrest. In June, the same year – 1994 – the Harkat-ul-Ansar kidnapped two British nationals while they were trekking near Pahalgam in Kashmir's Anantnag district. One of them, Kim Housego, was the son of David Housego, a well-known Delhi-based journalist. High on the list of demands put forth by the HUA was the release of Azhar. But when that didn't work, another plot was hatched four months later in the month of October.

This time, Omar Sheikh (now implicated in the kidnapping and death of Daniel Pearl, *Wall Street Journal's* South Asia correspondent) was sent to India with the express purpose of kidnapping foreigners to secure the Maulana's release. He managed to befriend an American and three British tourists and keep them chained at a safe house on the outskirts of Delhi but

was soon nabbed by the police. Like Azhar, he found himself in jail and both languished there for years without much progress on their legal cases.

Pakistan did not give up despite Sheikh's arrest and the next year, in 1995, five more foreigners were kidnapped by the Al Faran, a front name for the HUA. Again, the name that topped the list of the militants the Al Faran wanted released in exchange for the hostages was Azhar's. Kashmir authorities continued negotiations with the captors for many months before the link snapped and the hostages were given up for dead. The Maulana's importance for the Pakistani establishment can be judged from the fact that their High Commission in India approached the Ministry for External Affairs for his release on the plea that he was a journalist.

Technically, that is how the Maulana began – as the editor of *Sada-i-Mujahid* – but he was much more than that. As master motivator, his mind was more lethal than an AK-47, his words more dangerous than bullets. His speeches hit home and indoctrinated many minds. Even when in jail, Azhar continued with his writing, smuggling letters out with help from sympathetic jail sources.

Azhar was finally freed in exchange for passengers aboard IC-814 – hijacked from Kathmandu to Kandahar in the last week of December 1999. The desperate attempt to secure his release – after several rounds of kidnappings didn't do the trick – was mounted after the prison riot in the Jammu jail in June 1999. The riot started after a daring escape bid by the foreign mercenaries and local militants. Sajjad Afghani and other inmates had been secretly digging a tunnel through the jail and had managed to do so without being detected. Azhar too had checked out the tunnel but wriggled out after going in six feet saying it needed to be broadened if big-built people like him were to get through.

The escape bid failed and Sajjad was killed in the firing. Sajjad's killing, in fact, pressed alarm buttons in Pakistan and the authorities feared that Azhar too would be similarly killed. Always wiser only on hindsight, Indian authorities now believe that the hijacking was staged to ensure Azhar's flight to safety.

The negotiating team – drawn from the Ministry of External Affairs and the intelligence agencies – gave up only after they realised that the hijackers would not stop short of blowing up the plane. The only thing the hijackers did do was scale down their demands: at one point they were even demanding that Sajjad Afghani's body be dug up and handed back to them. What they were not willing to settle for was getting back other militants in lieu of either Azhar or Omar Sheikh.

The 'journalist' in Azhar helped him develop sources and keep abreast of developments, not only during the hijacking but also all through his years in jail. After Sajjad's death, Azhar went into an introspective phase and his mood changed only after he managed to convince a lawyer – who visited the Jammu jail – to get him a photograph of Sajjad's grave. He even managed to smuggle out a long letter he wrote to Sajjad's parents, the contents of which provide a rare insight into Azhar's psychology: 'Honourable parents, man sometimes pins his hopes on small trifling things and then waits for them to come true . . . but Allah Ta'ala, the magnanimous one, instead of granting him trifles, gives him far greater. It was my cherished hope that I would come to your house and give you the glad tidings that your son had been set free. I used to dream that I would attend his wedding and as the priest, deliver his marriage sermon . . . instead of freedom and marriage, Allah decided to give you exceptional honour and unparalleled happiness. He accepted your son in his divine mercy and took Sajjad out of prison and made him a guest of His own. Instead of marrying him to some mortal woman, Allah married him to the Hours of Jannah. I congratulate you for this honour, for the blessing that you have received . . . everyone has to taste the flavour of death but the death your son has tasted is delicious and sweet. A death that is a million times better than life, which life itself envies; a death, which Allah says, must not be called death . . .

. . . Respected parents, Islam has fallen upon such distressing times. The infidels are trying to efface Islam and the Muslims from the face of the earth. The irony is that the Muslims themselves, out of greed for this world, have pushed Islam out of their homes. In such conditions, whoever stands up and fights

for Islam, gives up his very life for its supremacy. How dear he must be to Allah. You should be felicitated that your son is among those dear to Allah. In these distressing times, when Muslims have lost their identity, your son by embracing martyrdom has focused the world's attention upon this unique characteristic of Islam. Millions of Allah's blessings are upon him who even in prison could never be subjugated. Not for a single moment did he bow to his captors. They beat him and tortured him till they got tired but he untiringly proclaimed the supremacy of Islam. Annoyed beyond measure by his challenging cry, the enemy often told him that he would die in jail because of his religious notions. Sajjad used to scoff at them and tell them that he wanted nothing else and that he had left home in search of martyrdom. At such times, his eyes shone with intensity and fervour.

'The other time I saw him so happy was the day he left us on his final journey. There was a deep, peaceful smile upon his face that I shall never forget for as long as I live. As he had been brutally tortured and his death had been so sudden, I was crying continuously till I saw his face and my spirits lifted in joy and in gratitude to Allah. Your son preferred courage to cowardice, piety to sinfulness. The reward of a single day spent on jihad is better than this world and everything in it. You need not be ashamed or sad because he was not in prison for any crime but for having tried to safeguard the honour of his Kashmiri mothers and sisters and for having fought for the greatness of Islam . . . I want to write so much more but you must be aware of the restrictions on us prisoners. It needs the help of Allah Ta'ala for a letter to be sent from here. This year, in the month of Ramadan, all of us had earnestly prayed for martyrdom or for release from jail. Sajjad's prayers have been granted while the rest of us are waiting. Who will be the one to lie next to Sajjad in the Jammu graveyard, no one knows. If I become the lucky one then I ask you to pray for me too . . .'

According to Jammu jail authorities, Azhar too spent much time in prayer and would interact, if at all, only with other foreign militants lodged in the same prison. Nursing nothing but sheer contempt for the non-Muslim officials, he had little fear of reprisal for he would call them infidels to their faces. In custody, he also

exhibited leadership qualities and sorted out differences that would often crop up between Pakistani mercenaries and Kashmiri militants. It was against the principle of Islam, he would tell them, and urge them to stay united because their cause was the same.

Booked under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act (TADA), the case against him progressed slowly. Subsequently, he was also charged with the jailbreak attempt. At a loss about what to do with foreign militants – as opposed to today when the unwritten orders are to kill – Azhar spent close to six years in jail but it was only after his release that the Indian authorities realised that he was a live bomb that had been ticking for all the six years that he was behind bars.

Scared that the hijackers would use their own bombs to blow up the hijacked plane and its passengers, a shamefaced Jaswant Singh, Minister for External Affairs, flew him, Omar Sheikh and a third militant, Mushtaq Zargar, in his own plane and landed in Kandahar to secure the hostages on board the hijacked Indian Airlines plane. It was clear to most that this could only be an invitation to terror. For Azhar himself, it was a moment when he had been blessed. His flight to freedom is, once again, best described in his own words. 'The plane was flying high and heading for Pakistan and soon it would be over Baluchistan and then over Afghanistan. I turned to look back and caught the curiosity-filled glance of Mushtaq Zargar, Kashmir's notable commander. Another mujahideen companion, Omar Sheikh, was sitting a few rows ahead of me. Each of us had three guards around us. I counted the others and they totalled around 90. Jaswant Singh, the Minister of Bharat, sat in the very first row. He had a personal physician with him who gave him some tablets. The cabin crew politely offered us refreshments but we declined saying we were fasting. We were neither hungry nor thirsty but lusting for the freedom that would soon be ours. The historic moment arrived when the plane started descending . . .

' . . . The runway flashed by and I was a mixture of emotions. The land where the plane had touched down, everything belonging to it, was intensely dear to me. Mullah Omar, the person whose deep love filled my heart, lived here in Kandahar. He, whose presence is a true blessing for the Muslims, had made

Islam proud. When I was in prison, I desperately yearned to behold this city and kiss the hand of Mullah Omar . . . the plane was racing towards the airport building and the sight of the beautiful faces of the thousands of Taliban armed guards was adding joy to my heart. I was surprised to see such a vast number of guards lining the runway . . . I thought it would take hours for the formalities to be completed and an unknown fear gnawed at me. I felt like breaking the door of the plane and running like a mad man down the tarmac. As soon as the door opened, a member of the Indian team came towards me and said "Maulana sahab, come with me quickly". I told him to wait so I could tie my turban, since this was the land of the Taliban. As soon as my feet touched the ground, my heart was transformed . . .

. . . Taliban officials greeted us at the foot of the stairs. Maulvi Muhammad Akhtar Usmani, the Kandahar Corps Commander, was among them and after a warm embrace he showed me into a car. A few feet away stood the Indian plane that had been hijacked a week ago. Our car came to a halt. The Corps Commander walked to the plane and said something to the hijackers above. As I watched mesmerised, two masked men came down with the use of a rope ladder and ran towards our car and hugged me in a warm embrace. A storm of emotions washed over us and tears welled in our eyes. Had the world seen those tears, they would have known why these softhearted men – being called terrorists and extremists – had taken this step. It was because of the atrocities committed by India and its barbaric treatment that had driven these men [sic]. I couldn't help thinking of one thing: the day my hands had been tied behind my back and I had been pushed into a truck was a Friday. The truck had headed for the prison where my life in captivity had started and today was a Friday too. Both my hands were free and I was sitting in a Taliban car heading towards freedom, a freedom about which my prayer is: Ya Allah make it a precursor to the liberation of Kashmir, the Babri Masjid and the Masjid-Al-Aqsa (Jerusalem).'

Azhar's entry into Afghanistan was as dramatic as his exit from India. Not only was he personally flown by Jaswant Singh, he had also been escorted to Delhi from Jammu by A.S. Dulat, the RAW chief who is now an adviser in the Prime Minister's

Office. What the Government of India obviously didn't realise then was that they were freeing a deadly trio.

The association between Azhar and Omar Sheikh did not start with the rescue plan, but in 1993 when Omar came to Pakistan from London where he was studying at the London School of Economics (LSE). Born and brought up in England, Omar had an aggressive nature even as a child and often picked fights in school for being referred to as a 'Paki'. He was twice suspended from school for objecting to 'racial remarks' but remained a bright student, picking up a scholarship of 6,000 pounds for getting good grades. But what went passionately with school books was his penchant for Islamic literature and his consciousness of being a Muslim.

While at the LSE – after he failed to get admission either at Stanford or Harvard – Omar joined the Islamic Society, while also pursuing an interest in arm-wrestling. Not only did he participate in the world-level, arm-wrestling championship in Geneva in October 1992, but also made it to the fifth position at London's arm-wrestling meet. It was the activities of the Islamic Society that made a mark on him and interestingly, he had with him – in class and in the Society – a friend in Hussain Nawaz Sharif, son of former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Hussain contested the elections for the post of the Society's general secretary but lost.

In November 1992, the Society decided to observe 'Bosnia week' and collected funds for the Bosnian cause by showing films on atrocities against Muslims. Images of starving children and crimes against pregnant women played an important role in shaping his mind. As he told his interrogators in India after his arrest, 'Hussain Nawaz Sharif and I decided to do something for the cause but no one got down to actually doing anything concrete.'

Omar, however, decided that it wasn't enough to just collect funds. Enquiries about Bosnia soon saw him join the Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief Agency of which famous pop singer Cat Stevens was the president. Unhappy with mere relief work, Omar – on a subsequent trip to Pakistan – made contact with HUM chief Fazlur Rehman Khalil and soon found himself at a

training camp where he first came into contact with Azhar – not with the person but his voice. Omar found himself totally taken in with the Maulana's speech, reverberating through the training camp. 'The true road to Islam is the Afghan way . . . I don't want to see the youth wasting their time in cricket or football. I am interested in those who are willing to wield the AK-47, pistols and rocket launchers.'

Unknown to Omar, Azhar had already met his father on a trip to London. Omar and Azhar finally came face to face in December 1993 when the Maulana convinced the London-bred youth to concentrate on Kashmir instead of Bosnia as there were already enough fighters for that struggle. India, he said, had to be taught a lesson and Kashmir was to be liberated. Few came into contact with Azhar without being mesmerised and Omar was no exception.

The day they set foot in Kandahar, the two apparently called on Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden who they thought were the biggest champions of Islam. Even after they reached Pakistan, a week later, the two kept in constant touch and Azhar soon came to the forefront on 31 January 2000 – exactly a month after the touchdown in Kandahar – and announced the formation of the Jaish-e-Mohammed. Addressing a gathering of about 10,000 armed followers outside a mosque in Karachi, Azhar thundered, 'I have come here because it is my duty to tell you that Muslims should not rest in peace until we have destroyed America and India. Kashmir has to be liberated from Indian rule. Soldiers of Islam have come from twelve countries to free Kashmir. Our organisation has nothing to do with politics. We fight for religion and do not believe in the concept of nations. We want Islam to rule the world.' Charged by his fiery speech, the crowd responded with slogans of 'Death to India, death to the United States.'

Unlike his friend Sajjad Afghani who had been married to the Hoors of Jannah, Azhar decided to marry a mortal but decided on his wedding day to undertake a six-month journey and stay away from his wife. What he was doing for six months was motivating and training the Jaish cadre – most of them dedicated HUM fighters who switched sides. Six years in jail had,

in fact, made no difference to Azhar's jihad factory. If at all, it had only expanded.

Azhar had wasted no time in launching the Jaish-e-Mohammed for he now had two vital men – Omar and Mushtaq Zargar – by his side. Omar like him was a die-hard jihadi and Zargar had a network of contacts in the Kashmir Valley, particularly in Srinagar, from where he had started his journey as a militant and had come to head the Al Umar, a dreaded insurgency group. While Azhar was the motivator and fund collector, Zargar helped him recruit local Kashmiris for the Jaish. Omar was the arms instructor, trained as he was in the use of small and heavy weapons. Together, their motto was: jihad is worship and obedience to Allah, and that Jaish was the need of the hour to revive the spirit of the holy war.

While its main office was in Islamabad, the Jaish started a training camp at Balakot in the North West Frontier Province to train these holy warriors. Initially, only a couple of tents, the training camp soon became a huge complex comprising several buildings which included a residential complex, a kitchen, guest houses, a dispensary and a mosque. Encouraged by the ISI to wage its war against India, the training camp operates quite openly: it does not have a boundary wall but about 400 armed compatriots are deployed at vantage points around the perimeter where youth are trained in batches of 800 to 1000. While there are training camps in other Pakistani provinces, the one at Balakot is the most elaborate and is reputedly run by Yousuf, a Christian convert from Sindh who is married to Azhar's sister.

Outside the perimeter of the training camps, Zargar and Azhar were also influencing minds in the Kashmir Valley and with the help of maulvis in mosques, training them to become suicide bombers. It was the Jaish, in fact, which introduced and spread this new terror tool to devastating effect. Security officials in Srinagar were surprised to find in April 2000 that a local, 17-year-old boy had decided to convert his body into a guided missile. Also shocked were his parents who only knew their son as a shy, introvert who usually spent his time studying so he could go on and fulfil his dream of becoming a doctor. Afaq even got himself

photographed wearing a doctor's coat and a stethoscope and kept the framed picture in his room.

The youngest of three brothers, none in the family thought Afaq's behaviour had changed when he started spending nights in the local mosque next door. It was good, his parents thought, that he was taking an interest in religion. They were not overly worried even when, on some evenings at home, Afaq would read the Quran by candlelight. It soon became a routine – the flickering flame and the Quran and then Afaq would start reading out aloud and start crying.

Till one day – when he just left home never to return. He had driven a stolen red Maruti car laden with explosives to the high security barrier bordering the 15 Corps Army Headquarters in Srinagar and blown himself up. The explosion heralded the advent of the suicide bomber, with live bombs that caused heavy destruction of men and material with no real cost to the militant group itself.

Flush with funds and men, willing to die, the Army of Mohammed is one of the most potent groups operating in Kashmir and has, according to Indian intelligence agencies, 'carried out more than 100 attacks on security forces and their strategic installations.' The most lethal attack came on 1 October 2001 – three weeks after the World Trade Center towers collapsed in New York – and Azhar was quick to claim credit. He withdrew it the next day, purportedly under pressure from his mentors in the Pakistani establishment. But that his handlers could hold sway over him was evident even in March 2000 when Azhar was put under house arrest during the visit of President Bill Clinton.

Under pressure from the United States – after the attack on the Indian Parliament on 13 December 2001 – Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf was forced to freeze the accounts of the Jaish, among other groups, and arrest the Maulana. But like Omar Sheikh – who is allowed to make phone calls to his father while in custody – Azhar too is allowed visitors.

Despite the ban on the Jaish, the organisation's activities though constrained have not come to a halt. Its office has shifted from Islamabad to Bahawalpur – Azhar's hometown – as Daniel Pearl found, much to his peril.

His kidnapping and killing only proved that despite the crackdown on the jihadi elements, there are enough who are their own cause. Azhar may be in custody at the moment but his mindset will not change. It did not, even in the six years that he spent in Indian jails. Jihad is in his mind and it is that concept that he is wedded to. The suicide attack on the Srinagar assembly on 1 October shows that Azhar revisited India, if only, in spirit. But he had begun to discover himself much earlier. The young student who joined the madrasa at Karachi's Binori mosque is today the chief of the Jaish-e-Mohammad. Most wanted, not only for the weapon he wields, but for his mind.