

KASHMIR LEADERSHIP IN A STATE OF MENTAL CONFUSION

by

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Contradictory statements have been emanating from various quarters on the future of Kashmir. Mehbooba Mufti, the present Chief Minister stated at the Express Adda recently, 'the only way forward is to have a dialogue, which I am glad is happening now'. She was talking on the appointment of Dineshwar Sharma as the interlocutor. MOS Jitendra Sharma simultaneously stated in Jammu that Sharma's appointment does not signal any change, as talks were always on. He implied the two visits of the home minister to the state.

Farooq Abdullah, president of the National Conference (NC), recently stated, 'While POK belongs to Pakistan, Kashmir belongs to India. This would never change. Independent Kashmir is also not a reality.' He also stated, 'Holding talks (with the interlocutor) is not enough. The Indian government must also hold talks with Pakistan.' He mentioned that if the government was open to tabling the interlocutor's report in parliament, it would instil confidence in the same. He has been making anti-India comments, seeking to restore the sagging future of his National Conference in the valley.

The Hurriyat have been speaking like parrots all through history. Their standard comment has been that without talking to Pakistan, there would be no solution. A new line added has been stopping the use of pellet guns. The youth of Kashmir have perpetually been demanding azadi, implying an independent state of Kashmir alone, created on the lines of Switzerland. When questioned on this, Mehbooba stated that a fourteen-year-old cannot describe what azadi is, but still takes to the streets. The few militant groups seeking a caliphate are only worth ignoring.

Pakistan Prime Minister, Shahid Abbasi, addressing a conference on 'future of Pakistan 2017' at the London School of Economics, rejected the idea of an independent Kashmir. He stated that the idea is floated but has no reality. He also added that there was no support for a demand for an independent Kashmir. On the issue of talks with India, he stated, 'talks are the only way forward. Without talks, no quantum change is possible.' The Indian view has remained constant, POK is an integral part of India and there would be no talks unless Pak stops supporting terror.

Into this quagmire enters Dineshwar Sharma, the central government's interlocutor for Kashmir. He is possibly the first interlocutor to have been granted an official status, which does convey the message that this government is serious. Initially the centre had sought three months from the supreme court, which was hearing the case against article 35A, claiming it had appointed an interlocutor. However, post his first visit to the state, Sharma stated in an interview, in reply to a question on how he visualizes progress, 'If I remain an interlocutor for two years, you ask me this question after two years. If I am removed in six months, I will not have anything to say.' Interestingly, the government has two years before the next elections, thus leaving the nation wondering what its final aims are.

Within the valley, normalcy is beginning to emerge. Militancy remains under control, money to fund violence is missing, terror groups are under pressure from Pak to act, but lack resources and moral courage, compelling them to strike banks for funds and weaker targets like police personnel on leave. The Hurriyat is side lined with no funds to sponsor violence or win supporters. The second rung and close relatives of the top rung of the Hurriyat are behind bars, with the rest awaiting calls for being investigated.

As per the DGP of police J and K, stone pelting is down by 90%. Thus, while the atmosphere is improving, divergent views and stringent stands have made progress forward slow. Is there truly a way forward? Is ignoring some suggestions with unimplementable solutions an option? Are demands for talks with Pakistan feasible under any circumstances?

The first requirement is changing mindset based on realities. The youth need to be explained that azadi is never feasible, either from the Indian side or even from Pak, as is evident from the statement by the Pak PM and the attitude of the deep state. Further, the UN resolution some from the valley keep referring to, is outdated and can never be considered. Even the resolution mentions Kashmir joining India or Pak, not independence. Hence, they need to seek solutions, within the Indian constitution. It is only by integrating would they reap the benefits of development. They must be assured that the centre has no desire to change demography of the region.

Secondly, the government needs to ignore unimplementable demands like complete autonomy and dialogue with Pak. Complete autonomy had been discarded way back with the signing of the Baig-Parthasarthy accord in 1975, when Sheikh Abdullah was the chief minister, as per the MOS Jitendra Singh. He also stated that Sheikh Abdullah

legitimized his acceptance for central laws by framing the DD Thakur committee to review all central laws, since it gave a positive report on the same. According to Jitendra, Abdullah took this action once he realized central laws have been beneficial for the state.

It is also clear that the deep state, which controls Pak, would never desire peace nor talks. Pak's stand is evident. It would never permit any solution where even a shred of autonomy is considered for Kashmir including POK, as it would lose control of the region, due to its highhanded approach and brutal suppression of POK. Nor would it be willing to discuss POK, whose demography it is attempting to change. It has further complicated the issue by permitting China to build the CPEC and gifted land to it.

Thus, those mentioning that talks with Pak and that it is also a stakeholder in the region, are doing so, knowing the government would be unwilling. For the Hurriyat and the NC, continuing violence is a means of maintaining power and enhancing their control over the region. For the NC, it is a means of projecting to the populace that they are their supporters, whom the government ignores, while the Hurriyat is aware that their relevance is only due to violence. If violence ceases, so would funding from Pak. Both know that they would have no political role in case peace prevails and development moves ahead. The NC is behaving more like a valley based party, than a state one.

While the atmosphere is conducive for peace, there are complications being created by self-serving groups for personal gains. Unless anti-national elements are marginalized, political parties seeking desperate survival strategies ignored and the youth made to realize that their anti-India stance has only caused more harm than good for themselves, there would be limited forward movement. While Dineshwar Sharma has his role cut out, he would need the support of political parties interacting at every level, displaying the desire of the government for meeting the needs of the public.

Talks with the interlocutor would be slow and time consuming. Some groups may have interacted, many would wait and see who else moves forward. No one wants to be noticed as desperate to rush to him. The Hurriyat would never officially venture forward, as it would be a loss of face, however, they may send their junior representatives, possibly as part of a deal with the government to go slow in persecuting them, considering their advanced ages and stature. The NC would seek political mileage by making public statements supporting their demands, rather than directly

interacting. The most important community which need to be interacted with are the youth, born after the commencement of militancy, as they have witnessed the power of the army all through their lives and feel they are being suppressed.

With this as the possible near future scenario, forward movement would be time consuming. However, Sharma would need to increase his visibility across the region. The more visible he is, the more would be the interactions and greater the trust on the government. It is only then that the situation on the ground would only change. For this, all who desire peace and development and a better future for the youth, need to join hands and support this initiative.

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