

THE CHANGING NARRATIVE IN THE VALLEY

BY

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A few recent events in the valley need to be assessed in totality to draw relevant deductions. Firstly, since the nineties, when terrorists including locals who had joined terror groups, began implementing their own brand of justice by killing Kashmiri's against whom they had a grudge, such incidents have been rare. It was this wanton killing which drove a wedge leading to alienation of terrorists from the masses and resulted in security forces regaining the initiative. Its re-emergence in recent times is possibly aimed at creating fear within the common Kashmiri and obtaining forcible support, however is also leading to alienation.

Secondly, stone pelting has been in vogue for decades, but rarely have local school children and tourists been targeted. It was aimed at security forces, who initially maintained restraint, no longer. Incidents of strong counters by security forces are on the rise, adding to alienation of the local population and its exploitation by anti-national elements. Incidents of targeting innocents and tourists possibly linked to a larger design of isolating the valley from the nation. Those who criticized the recent incidents, including the separatists, have done so solely for media attention.

Stone pelting which had reduced post demonetization as also following NIA and ED raids on hawala transactions is back again. The gusto with which the NIA and ED commenced their investigation appears to have fizzled out and fund flows are back on track. Terror groups have stopped raiding banks for funds. With no shortfall of funds, money to support stone throwing and increased violence has re-emerged. Only those caught in the sting operation, conducted by a news channel, remain behind bars, the others are back in the valley. The reasons for the lack of push by the NIA and ED remains a mystery.

Thirdly, interference in security force operations is also increasing, with locals prepared and ready with stones. Response by the security agencies has been equally strong, leading to casualties. In rare cases, security forces have called off the operation, aware that the same militants would be trapped soon, after all he who picks the gun, dies by it.

Fourthly, most of the terrorists being eliminated in towns and villages are local militants, who though have picked the gun, yet remain insecure, hence operate close to their home base, banking on assistance from stone pelters in case they are trapped. Most are ill-trained and ill-equipped. Thus, while numbers joining militancy are on the rise, so is the level of elimination. Figures declared till Apr state 33 civilians, 28 security personnel and 72 terrorists have been killed this year. The fact that information flows to security forces on the presence of militants is indicative of animosity between them and the local populace.

As per a report in the Kashmir Reader last week, Syed Geelani commented that a 'few black sheep' are working as informers of armed forces and they are responsible for increased encounters. He went on to add, 'They, for petty gains are providing inputs to the forces.' He made these comments while addressing the funeral gathering of slain assistant professor Mohamed Rafi over the telephone.

Fifthly, local terrorists knowing that they are ill-trained and have a bleak chance of survival yet hesitate to surrender. This is because of either being dubbed a coward locally or fear of future harassment. It could also be because an eliminated terrorist is glorified, while a surrendered is insulted. Therefore, despite all calls by the DGP J and K and senior army officials, surrenders have not occurred at desired rates. Possibly by moving surrendered militants away from their home districts, would there be more.

With the above resulting in mounting casualties on all sides, Mehbooba had requested the government to declare a 'ceasefire' from the commencement of Ramzan, later this month, till the conclusion of the Amarnath Yatra, in August. Her intention was to break the cycle of violence and re-establish confidence. Her claim that this request is from all political parties in the state was wrong as its alliance partner, the BJP, disagreed.

The army chief in an interview to a national daily almost at the same time stated that while he is 'ready to suspend' military operations to avoid civilian casualties, 'but who would guarantee that there won't be fire against our men or at our vehicles. Who will guarantee that policemen, political workers and our men returning home on leave are not attacked or killed'. Further, stone pelting would continue, which again is hazardous and would be retaliated to, hence recommencing the cycle of violence.

Historically the Hizbul Mujahideen had proposed a ceasefire in Jul 2000 but withdrew it when India refused to accept Pak as a third party in talks for resolving Kashmir. The 'Non-initiation of Combat Operations (NICO)' declared by Vajpayee in Nov 2000 was effective for a limited duration but had no tangible result. It lasted 58 days and during it blasts

occurred at Srinagar airport, Doordarshan studio, police and security posts. During this period, militants killed over 170 civilians. It provided militants time to regroup and had to be called off when they began pressurizing locals.

The present call by Mehbooba appears to be ill-timed. By removing cases against known stone pelters she has given them a free hand, leading to enhanced casualties. The streak of violence continues across the region. While security forces may restrict their operations only based on hard intelligence, however, militant groups and stone throwers would never adhere to it. On the contrary, it would enable them to enhance recruitment, training and attacks on isolated posts and individuals. Thus logically, the defence minister, projecting the army's viewpoint rejected the call.

The army chief's statement on 'Azadi' being only a dream, did invite criticism, yet is the reality. Never, irrespective of levels of violence, could a part of the state ever be permitted to break away. The initial Pak plan was to tie down the Indian army, not seek a breakaway, as they remain aware that it is nigh impossible. They have never permitted it in their troubled western provinces and are aware of the Indian army might. Yet, they play these cards, seeking to befool the local populace, who unless they understand the game, would remain puppets of Pak and their proxies in India.

The balance of power has clearly shifted into the hands of security forces. Local militants remain under pressure and are constantly on the move. Pak based militants remain in hiding, rarely being encountered. Direct attacks on security forces are limited and rare. As the army chief stated number of kills do not count as the cycle of violence would continue.

As the changing narrative proves, while local alienation may exist, control and domination by security forces is complete. Despite any action by security forces, stone pelting would continue as the youth have been made to believe that they could succeed in their demands for 'Azadi'. Declaring a unilateral NICO may change this narrative, hence has been rightly rejected.

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