

## **Contextualizing Kashmir in 2010**

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### **Introduction**

The discourse on the Kashmir issue – indeed rarely is the state mentioned without adding synonyms of the word ‘issue’ - has been strangely obdurate and resilient to competing or novel dimensions as it remains shrouded in historical complexities and ideological crosscurrents. The protests of 2010 that are being described as the Kashmiri intifada have, however, led to a much needed redefining of conventional wisdom. They represent and belong to a set of people distinct from those that the existing Kashmiri narrative had been accustomed to; this is a younger generation with different ideals, grievances, aspirations, and new ways of showing their antagonism. And while the separatist agenda is allegedly not high on their wish-list, their frustrations and demands as in a remarkably sustained movement present several challenges for India.

The 2008 state elections in Kashmir, with a voter turnout of over 60 percent, had been hailed by India as a rejection of separatist politics by the people of Kashmir. The newly elected government under Omar Abdullah, which came to power with a self-professed mandate of good governance and focus on human rights violations as part of its campaign promises, was seen as a hope for the younger generation. It is not for no reason that this term – the younger generation – is widely used when it comes to discussing Kashmir, and as we proceed in this study to contextualize the protests of 2010, we shall understand why this is so.

The aspirations and hopes in the new government were soon dashed however, as events in Kashmir exacerbated an already volatile situation. In May 2009, a few months after the elections, two women were allegedly raped and murdered, an incident that began a chain of events that have defined the new state of affairs in Kashmir. This led to mass protests as personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) were accused, but public demands to arrest the culprits fell on deaf ears. Indeed by the end of the year the CBI, which was tasked to resolve the crime, ruled out the possibility of the women being raped and murdered by CRPF personnel and instead concluded in its report that they had died by drowning. Disappointed and enraged, Kashmiris saw this as an effort on the part of the government to protect the police force. This may not have been the most disturbing, or even the most publicized event in recent times. Yet, as in most social and political movements, there comes a time when specific incidents and people become symbols and lead to a juncture in the way that unequal power relations exist in troublesome lands. For Kashmir that time came in 2010.

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The Shopian incident was still fresh in the minds of the Kashmiri people when the news of fake encounters began to make headlines. On May 30, 2010, one such incident was exposed in the Machil sector where three young Kashmiris killed by an Indian army unit were declared cross-border terrorists.<sup>1</sup> As further light was shed on the course of events, it was discovered that this was a 'staged' fake encounter, the motive behind which was the monetary rewards and promotions that are incentives for security personnel who act with vigilance when faced with cross-border terrorism on the Line of Control (LoC).

This expectedly exacerbated tensions and the Kashmiri people once again took to the streets. It was during these protests that a seventeen-year old student was killed by security forces on June 11, which resulted in the current prolonged phase of violent protests in the valley. The violence and killings have not abated and since then, more than 100 people have lost their lives during the protests, including women and children as young as nine years old.

While refusing to admit its own failures and trying to understand the roots of unrest, the Indian government was quick to shift the blame on the infamous Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), an allegedly Pakistan-backed militant organization working in Kashmir and India. Home Minister P. Chidambaram asserted that anti-national elements were trying to exploit the situation in Kashmir and that these were clearly linked to the LeT. This statement again evoked strong reactions in Kashmir as it highlighted the insensitivity of the government and the fact that it was unable to contextualize the violence. In a bitter reaction, Ms. Mehbooba Mufti, leader of the main opposition party in Kashmir, termed Chidambaram's assertion an "insult to the Kashmiri people".<sup>2</sup>

Fingers were also pointed towards hardliner separatist leaders for fomenting the trouble. The Union Home Ministry claimed to have intercepted a conversation between two senior office-bearers of the Syed Ali Shah Geelani's Hurriyat faction in which they discussed the killing of at least fifteen people in a procession near Srinagar.<sup>3</sup> Concerns are also being raised that the current unrest is a ploy by the separatists to revive the Kashmir issue at the international level, with speculation that the protests would continue unabated till President Obama's visit to India later in the year.

Predictably, the finger-pointing also involved accusations levelled at Pakistan; on July 7, 2010, Indian Defence Minister A.K Antony accused the neighbouring country of "conscious, calculated attempts" to infiltrate the LoC by pushing more terrorists into Kashmir.<sup>4</sup> Next day, the Congress party also held Pakistan responsible for the turmoil and advised the government to take up the issue of 'inimical elements' from across the border having a hand in perpetrating violence.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the government rhetoric essentially parroting opinions that have lasted for decades, the intelligentsia had a different view of the protests. Even

though it was widely believed that Pakistan could take advantage of the situation by mobilising the international community, its hand in creating the unrest itself was by and large rejected. In fact, it is professed that the attempt to drag Pakistan into what is an indigenous and spontaneous uprising of the Kashmiri people, or to relate these protesters to LeT or al-Qaeda, exemplifies the highhandedness of the CRFP when dealing with the protesters.

State and the Union governments are now also blamed for failing to build on the gains made by security forces in not being able to bring the overall law and order situation under control. It is pointed out that besides massive abuse of human rights, other factors such as the growing gap of communication between the state government and the people of Kashmir, corruption and mismanagement of public affairs played a central role in forcing the people to register their protest. Moreover, the bold stance of individuals such as Arundhati Roy, who have immense global profile, has added new dimensions to the Kashmir cause and exasperated the Indian government.

The need for an internal dialogue between the Union government and Kashmiri political parties is essential if there is to be a serious attempt to address the political future of the state. Moreover, better training of the police and paramilitary forces to control mob violence and more humane response from politicians to people's grievances were some of the suggestions put forth by a number of analysts to control the situation in the valley. Before that can be done however, there is a need to contextualize the overall situation and take a more nuanced approach when dealing with the grievances of a new generation, which is essentially within a new milieu.

### **The Kashmiri intifada**

The protestors on the streets of Kashmir, the stone-pelters against a mighty security force, are champions of a cause that cannot be explained away in simple black and white terms. Stones as weapons and as a symbol of protest are no match for a sophisticated army and thus the situation needs to be studied holistically and should be focused on peoples' grievances and frustrations. That over a hundred civilians have been killed and there has been no reported casualty in the security forces is enough of a fact to establish that the intent behind the protests is not a physical, violent face-off. And the protestors are painfully aware of the futility of their actions as far as this physical mismatch is concerned. It is instead something much deeper than that.

The protestors are men, women, teenagers and even children as young as ten years old; inevitably then, the images induce sympathy even if the actions are condemned. Hence, while a religious scholar might come out with a fatwa declaring stone pelting as forbidden, there remains a grudging acceptance of its utility – even as a symbol of protest. Casual and passionate observers of the boiling pot that is Kashmir are faced with a contradiction: protests are

condemned, but they are understandable. In the long run, perhaps that – creating an understanding - is what such a movement will be hoping to achieve. And as this paper contends, the slogan of azadi or freedom, that is accompanying the protests, may well encompass a number of equally important but diverse demands.

Preceding narrative has been torn apart as a new generation emerges from the ashes of rebellions past. Indeed the entire Kashmiri script is bound to be rewritten with new actors as a younger generation born in the period of an overtly militarized Kashmir fills the shoes of its fathers.

While there has been a growing consensus among analysts that there is a need to see these protests as indigenous, home-grown and primarily against perceived and actual injustice due to official Indian policies, there is also a consensus that the state has been unable to do so. Instead the government is strongly criticised for not attempting to understand the complexities of a prolonged period of protest that threatens to pose the most difficult challenge for India in recent memory. A focus on economic concerns or the LeT as primary motivators ensures that solutions come in the shape of economic and political ‘packages’ that do nothing to ease tensions.

In fact, by touting job creation as a solution, the problems in Kashmir remain unresolved as leaders continue to ‘wrongly [identify] protests with unemployed frustration’;<sup>6</sup> a similar view is shared by Yoginder Sikand, who notes that it is rather a problem of competing narratives of Indian nationalists and religious identity that raises desire for independence from India.<sup>7</sup> While there are many unemployed in Kashmir, protestors are mainly well-settled professionals and students – azadi might well be a call for more democratic participation given the situation at hand.<sup>8</sup> The contention is that the protests have caught the centre off guard since they come after a period of relative peace. Sanjay Kak however decries such a view, noting that this was a ‘normalcy’ manufactured for tourists, and not a living reality for Kashmiris themselves.<sup>9</sup>

While a contemporary movement by all means, perhaps roots can be traced back in history. In a speech he intended to make in 1953, Shaikh Abdullah of the National Conference wrote that, ‘what the Muslim intelligentsia in Kashmir is trying to look for is a definite and concrete streak in India’.<sup>10</sup> That indeed is one dimension of azadi that the current protestors are continuing to fight for and as Badri Raina writes, “there is not a jot more or different that informs the frustrated Kashmiri youth in the valley ... [who are] willing to confront police bullets.”<sup>11</sup>

The frustration stems not from an Islamist agenda, or lack of economic opportunities. This is a conflict at the grassroots where members are leaders and leaders are members. It stems from a period of supposedly relative peace, during which promises of the current ‘democratic’ government, especially those regarding over-militarization and the draconian laws governing the behaviour of

security forces, did not come to pass. And that is essentially the heart of the matter since this is a generation that has seen everyday injustice at the hands of the very forces that are there to provide security.<sup>12</sup>

What then guides the process in what Omar Abdullah has conceded is a 'leaderless' revolt? The argument that this is a separatist movement led by the same old guard (or the relatively new one) in the shape of Geelani or Mirwaiz Umar Farooq is weak; as Zafar Choudhary asserts, if this had been the case then the violence would have ended either when they were put under detention and hence not in direct communication, or else when they made appeals for peace.<sup>13</sup> Indeed the movement is widespread and different from before - people attack government offices, buildings and even houses and there are even instances of policemen joining the azadi brigade.

The general consensus is that the situation is not in Geelani's hands and not of his making – as one protestor says, 'it's the stones that have made Geelani relevant'.<sup>14</sup> And as Praveen Swami contends, Kashmir's 'patriarch' has sentiments that differ from those of an 18-year old and his calls for peace appear meaningless.<sup>15</sup> Instead, this is a very large young population which is 'completely different from its predecessors. The first generation showed faith in leadership the second generation was in search of new leaders and the third generation doesn't want any leaders.'<sup>16</sup>

Hence, these are not the 'usual suspects' of previous generations, the rebellion being 'home-grown'.<sup>17</sup> And perhaps being leaderless is what embodies the protests and defines its 'random nature' with people standing at street corners shouting for azadi and seeing their numbers soar as others join them. Police and security forces contend that women and children are used as shields – but as Haidar contends, if this is true then they are 'voluntary shields'.<sup>18</sup> While this phenomenon occurs throughout the day and late into the night, the argument that azadi stands for multiple objectives also gains strength.<sup>19</sup>

Even since the protests have gained pace and limelight, events seem to be going from bad to worse – indeed the protestors themselves seem to have had their grievances increased. However, the human rights discourse has also entered the fray; this is not surprising since the 'David and Goliath disproportion of the protests, and its sheer effrontery, has begun to capture the imagination of a growing number of people in India.'<sup>20</sup> That activists like Arundhari Roy have joined this cause, can only mean, at least in terms of raising awareness, that the protests have been successful.

Law appears ill at ease and ill-informed as well. Section 121 of the Indian Penal Code for instance, invoked before the protests reached full throttle, gave the leeway for stone pelters to be tried for treason, regardless of disproportionality between the 'fighters' or even the age of the accused – all this while there is no attempt to explain what compels them to throw stones in the

first place. Instead, a tirade against them continued and some perhaps unfairly called it ‘gunless terrorism’.<sup>21</sup> In June, no less than a thousand were locked up as the government arrested ‘a few misguided youth’ and yet the protests continued unhindered, showing how the movement was not restricted to certain individuals or groups.<sup>22</sup>

Despite ‘lip service’ paid to de-militarization, the situation has worsened with the ‘draconian provisions of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act’ that gives them the leeway to interrogate and arrest individuals, being buttressed by ‘cosmetic changes [that] have included replacing the Border Security Force with an equal, perhaps greater strength of the Central Reserve Police Force’.<sup>23</sup> It goes without saying then, that the supposedly lawful securitization is the major hindrance to normalcy in Kashmir - and correspondingly, one major cause of the current protests.

What needs to be looked at are two fundamental issues – one, ‘the overwhelming presence of security forces on the streets and the daily harassment it brings with it’; and two, the absence of political freedom.<sup>24</sup> Thus a two-fold contextual solution needs to address Kashmir’s over-securitization and the creation of political space – in other words this refers to the provision of justice, which is ‘the only package Kashmir needs’.<sup>25</sup> This is important since economic indicators that have tended to define Kashmir’s problems, need to be downplayed in favour of more meaningful if less tangible solutions since ‘no stats can capture the extent of political alienation and severe psychological trauma experienced by a generation that has grown in the shadow of guns and bloodshed’.<sup>26</sup> To put things in perspective, it is pertinent to note that an estimated 17% of the population suffers from post-traumatic stress disorders.<sup>27</sup>

If any solution is to be offered, it is these social statistics that include qualitative and intangible indicators that need to be considered and not simply socioeconomics and LeT numbers. What are being brought up by the protestors are calls for structural and systemic changes that can not be encapsulated in the narrow formulations of economic and political packages. This ‘urban warfare’ is a spontaneous outburst against oppression that needs to be challenged holistically– in this case, for some, *azadi* is ‘just another word for nothing left to lose’.<sup>28</sup>

### **The novelty of protests**

One new factor perhaps exemplifying the randomness and ‘leaderlessness’ of the Kashmiri *intifada* – and one that presents itself to social scientists for a complete case study – is the role of cyber social networking. The novelty of the protests then is not just in the mindsets, it is also in the execution. These protestors are armed not only with rage and stones, but also with mobile phones and unlimited space on a burgeoning cyber network.

With online video sharing websites such as YouTube, there has been a spate of visual, emotive evidence of security forces and their actions against protestors armed with stones. But when officials claim that these are fake videos manufactured and paid for by various agencies, it only leads to further vehement rejection of the justification of the security forces.<sup>29</sup>

While this cyber activism brings new vigour, it also leads to new concerns. On the one hand, it becomes a matter of pride, a symbol of Kashmiri resilience that can be transferred quite literally to future generations taking the narrative beyond oral histories – this in itself reflects a sense of prolonged resistance that is likely to last generations. On the other hand, there are admissions by authorities of how cyber warriors are easily traced and could be tried for what are deemed to be punishable offences.<sup>30</sup>

There is in effect a direct communication with the rest of the world. YouTube and Facebook, another popular destination to disseminate information, are kept up-to-date with events, gatherings, pictures, videos, poetry and protests in Kashmir. Videos of protestors being killed and of the brutality of security personnel as well as comments by viewers give interesting insights to students of the movement. Moreover, groups on Facebook and blogs written by protestors become meaningful, albeit less academic sources to study the Kashmiri mindset.

With a ‘heavy handed approach’ against local journalists, online archives have naturally been buttressed, compelling protestors to launch a ‘new cyber war’, with even reports of youngsters being detained for ‘anti-national’ opinions on a Facebook community page.<sup>31</sup>

The *Times of India* reported one such page titled ‘I Protest’ that has over 2500 members.<sup>32</sup> This has apparently been deleted, but there are numerous other groups that have taken its place. While there is a need to take caution against overplaying the role of cyber networks before deeper analysis can be made, there is no denying its place in any social movement in this age. Constantly updated with news, images and organization of protests, this seemingly non-violent online activism provides significant ideological and also material support to a more violent street protest in Kashmir.

Groups such as ‘Kashmir Cyber Intifada 2010’ with over a thousand followers (in addition to countless others who have access), ‘I protest against the atrocities in Kashmir’ with over six thousand, ‘Kashmir Intifada 2010’ with over seven hundred and ‘Im a Kashmiri Stone Pelter’ with over five hundred followers, are just some of the significant examples. Emotionally charged both visually and linguistically, the latter two provide descriptions in the following words (original text):

Situation has changed and I am again in business in urban Kashmir, Ragda 2008 restored my lost glory, you called it a revolution, I watched spell bound vast multitude of people filling the streets of Kashmir, it was on that day at historic

Eidgah, the gun wielding elder passed the baton on to me and with a smile on his lip and tear in his eye said” your turn mate”. I still don’t know why those tears in the eyes of the elder, perhaps I am too young to understand this You can find me on any street of urban Kashmir, although I have some favourite spots, I love jamia Masjid and Maisuma, old town Varmul, Sopur, and Malakhnag Islamabad to name a few. You can easily recognize me as I am the best dressed youth of my area, trendy jeans, smart sports shoe, whacky jacket and few fashion accessories, they say I buy them from the money I get for stone pelting. My income is being discussed everywhere and there is no unanimity on that it varies from 100 to 2500, at times I am afraid that I may be brought under income tax net. My attire has little to do with fashion, and more with the nature of my job, I am supposed to be athletic and nimble footed and I have to mingle with the crowds, hence my attire. Ideal day at work is thrilling and exciting, the suspense, the drama, the surge and the chase is right out of 80s blockbuster Hindi cinema. I dodge shells and bullets, ala Rajnikanth, only difference is there is no retake on the street, either you dodge in first take or you are down in the gutter. Stone pelting used to be an art but with the passage of time it has developed into a science, it is more because of those chocolate pelters, some of whom are students of best schools of Srinagar. Purists moan the adulteration; pragmatists call it the need of the hour. These chocolates talk about projectile motion, angle of projection and range. Stone Pelting reflects my resistance against Indian oppression.<sup>33</sup>

Kashmir intifada is the struggle against Indian occupational forces. Since decades of subjugation and oppression people of Jammu & Kashmir have witnessed severe war crimes by Indian forces killing, molestation, rapes and disappearance are tools at their hands to suppress the sentiment for freedom. The scenic Kashmir Valley has been called ‘heaven on earth’, but for the past six decades the people of Kashmir have seen nothing but bloodshed and terror on their soil. In the past the Indian government used to blame Pakistan’s intervention in Kashmir for violence in the Valley, but over the years this blame game no longer exists. Indian forces have martyred more than one lakh and disappeared thousands.<sup>34</sup>

Videos and images of young men and children being killed, of the emotions in the protests and regular updates of civilian casualties as well as news reports are together making an online archive that may be of immense value as the dominant literature on the current history of Kashmir. The utility is obviously not just academic. New heroes are being born and there is awareness raising, planning and the provision of a platform and a common ground for those who share certain ideals, both for violent and non-violent protestors. One unifying factor is the collective hatred of security forces and a shared experience of everyday grievances that has created a strong collective memory among generations of Kashmiris. And that cannot be addressed through a myopic view of the region – the Indian response has to align itself to actual Kashmiri priorities.

### **Indian response**

Faced with this dilemma, the Indian government besides convening meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) on a regular basis, also decided to

take other political parties on board to evolve a common response. An all-party delegation, led by Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram, embarked on a visit to Jammu and Kashmir on September 20 to assess the situation. Having refused to meet the delegation, the Kashmiri leaders were put under house arrest and therefore had no other option but to receive its members at their homes.

Making fresh demands for a result-oriented dialogue, the moderate faction of the Hurriyat Conference and JKLF insisted on setting up Kashmir committees in India and Pakistan to find an everlasting solution. They argued that this will ensure that all major political forces in the region are on board, and also help to institutionalise and sustain the process to resolve the problems in Kashmir.<sup>35</sup> Five members of the all-party delegation, led by CPI(M) leader Sitaram Yechury, also called on Mr. Geelani who was urged to help in restoring normalcy. Reiterating his long-time demand, Mr. Geelani said that India should accept Kashmir as a disputed and illegally occupied territory.<sup>36</sup> Eleven members of the team visited a hospital in Srinagar but were met with protests by relatives and attendants of patients, forcing them to cut short their visit.

Based on the report that was presented to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh by the delegation, another meeting of the CCS was convened, where a new set of incentives was put forth. It was decided that the Centre will appoint a group of interlocutors under the chairmanship of an eminent person to begin the process of sustained dialogue in Jammu and Kashmir with political parties, groups, students, civil society and other stakeholders; the Jammu and Kashmir government would be advised to release all students detained for stone-pelting and similar violations of law and withdraw all charges against them.

The State government would be requested to immediately convene a meeting of the Unified Command to review deployment of security forces especially in Srinagar, with particular reference to de-scaling the forces at bunkers and check points in the city and other towns. The government would also grant an ex-gratia of Rs. 5 lacs to the family of each civilian killed since June 11 and review cases of all Public Safety Act (PSA) detainees, withdrawing detention orders in appropriate cases. Lastly, it was asked to take steps to immediately reopen all schools, colleges, universities, hold special classes and to ensure that examinations are conducted on schedule for the current academic year.<sup>37</sup>

However, withdrawal or dilution of the AFSPA was not discussed. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also asked members of an expert group to prepare a job plan for Jammu and Kashmir which has some three lac unemployed youths, to ensure that the employment opportunities generated are sustainable.<sup>38</sup>

For Kashmiri leaders, this initiative of the Indian government was a major disappointment. Expressing his dismay, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said that “the measures that have been announced do not convey much promise; they are administrative in nature and seem to be put in place to provide relief to the

beleaguered State government and deliberately shift focus from the actual issue of providing compensation and concessions to people”.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, a contextualized understanding had not set in.

Following the announcement of the eight-point initiative, the state government announced on September 27 the reopening of schools across the valley. While reminding that most of the people killed, wounded and jailed during the ongoing protests were students, Geelani appealed to teachers and the non-teaching staff to stay at home. Reopening of the schools was projected by the government as a first step towards normalcy but failed as the schools recorded “thin to very thin” attendance.<sup>40</sup>

In fact, much to the embarrassment of government, the media reported that while Minister for Education Peerzada Muhammad Sayeed urged people to send their children to school, his own son and a close relative remained absent<sup>41</sup> and school authorities had to make a request to ensure his son’s attendance. In order to ensure that schools and colleges remain open, the education department also announced that it was mulling action against institutions that were following the strike calendar announced by Geelani. In addition, in an effort to convince people of its sincerity, the state government also started to remove security bunkers from Srinagar city.

Furthermore, in order to give some relief to the people of Kashmir, a meeting of Unified Headquarters (UHQ) decided to remove 16 bunkers in Srinagar and hold a meeting of the committees to review areas declared disturbed under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

Subsequently, the first and foremost part of the eight point initiative – appointment of interlocutors for a sustained dialogue with all shades of opinion in the valley, was acted upon when a three member team was announced by Home Minister P. Chidambaram. It was widely speculated that prominent political personalities such as CPI (M) leader Sitaram Yechury and Wajahat Habibullah, an IAS officer of the Jammu and Kashmir cadre, would be appointed. Instead, noted journalist Dilip Padgaonkar, Information Commissioner Prof. M. M. Ansari, and trustee of Delhi Policy Group Prof. (Mrs) Radha Kumar, were nominated for the job.

Reacting to the nominations, Hurriyat leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani pointed out that they showed how the UPA government was not serious about resolving the Kashmir issue; these, he noted, are nothing but delaying tactics that the government of India has been indulging in since 1952. He further added that the appointment of interlocutors or the announcement of a dialogue process is futile until the government accepts the five-point formula put forth by his party for making the situation conducive for a dialogue.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq also came forth and termed the appointment as yet another non-serious initiative. “The government should first identify the reason to appoint the interlocutors. The dialogue process is step two. Step one is that the ground realities should change first. Dialogue and oppression cannot go together.” He announced that until the government acted upon his party's four-point programme, the moderate Hurriyat will not enter into any dialogue.<sup>43</sup> To Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front chief Mohammad Yasin Malik, the appointment of three interlocutors seemed like a “joke with the Kashmiri people given that a high-power all-party Parliamentary delegation failed to deliver on the same issue.”<sup>44</sup>

The nomination of the panel also failed to impress People's Democratic Party. Mehbooba Mufti, while pointing out the absence of any political face in the group said “the political input is missing in the names (of the Kashmir interlocutors) approved” and that “it has nothing to do with their capabilities but there should have been some reflection of the all-party delegation (which visited Kashmir last month as a confidence-building measure).”<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, by some accounts the nominations of interlocutors also took the Congress Party and Cabinet Ministers by surprise as it was expected that a senior member from the party would be asked to lead the group. Some believe that the absence of a senior politician has to do with the fact that the group of interlocutors are to work under the Union Ministry of Home Affairs and not the Prime Minister's office. This perhaps led to politicians' reluctance to be a part of the panel.

Whatever the reason, the absence of a known political face has given the impression that the interlocutors lack the mandate that is needed to take forward a suitable political process. It is being pointed out that none of the three nominees knows much about Kashmir, carries much political weight, or a positive profile in the Valley.

On the other hand, it is argued that the decision to nominate interlocutors was difficult because if they were to be chosen from political parties, there were strong chances that the plan would have fallen prey to partisan politics. The government tried to defend its decision by pointing out that since there is no official or political personality in the group, Kashmiris would be more willing to talk. The Home Minister also assured that there were no “red lines” and that the interlocutors would hold wide consultations with all sections of society to find a political solution to the Kashmir problem. However, such a justification has failed to convince the majority of critics.

In their first visit to the valley with a mandate of finding a lasting solution, the three member group met with a cold response from both the hardline as well as the moderate faction of APHC, who not only refused to meet the group but also advised local trade and student unions not to speak to them. In an

interesting development, the head of the group, Mr. Dileep Padgaonkar, created a stir by announcing that the group was looking at a permanent solution to the issue and that this was not possible without taking Pakistan on board. This led BJP to register its protest in the strongest possible words and demand an explanation from the Prime Minister's office.

Before the UPA government could offer its response, another member of the panel, Ms. Radha Kumar went on to say that if needed, a solution could be explored beyond the Indian constitution,<sup>46</sup> thereby giving another opportunity to the BJP to launch a scathing attack. Finding the government on the back foot, the Congress Party was forced to advise the interlocutors to refrain from "loud thinking"<sup>47</sup> and present their views in the form of recommendations to the government. With this shaky start, the promise of a permanent solution seems to be a distant dream and meanwhile, sporadic violence continues in the valley even as months have passed.

### **Conclusion**

The Kashmir imbroglio has not only unnerved the Indian government but has also exposed its lack of vision to deal with the situation. The eight point initiative announced by the Home Minister failed to meet expectations and the Union government's offer of appointing interlocutors for a sustained dialogue has been met with cynicism. It would indeed be a challenging task to persuade the Kashmiri people of sincerity in finding solutions and addressing grievances. It has been repeatedly pointed out that one of the reasons for the current unrest is a governance deficit. Omar Abdullah's government is held responsible not only for alienating people and using repressive measures against peaceful protesters but also for corruption. Yet, the Union government is seen as fully supporting the present regime.

India needs to understand that the Kashmiris who are protesting on the streets are mostly school and college going students who are increasingly being joined by women and children and are not demanding jobs or economic packages. The younger generation of Kashmiris has shown that no amount of economic incentives will convince them to settle for unconvincing political arguments. Kashmiris are out in the streets to protest for being repeatedly betrayed and for being denied their right to choose their future. Unless they are given political rights, peace in South Asia will remain an elusive dream.

The hope that with the passage of time Kashmiris will be assimilated in the Indian system of governance has not been realized. The recent and current protests have clearly indicated that the aspiration of "azadi" has successfully been transferred to a new generation. The mood in the valley can be gauged by the statement made by none other than Chief Minister Omar Abdullah himself when he created a furore by saying that Kashmir had not merged with India but only acceded to it. This statement led to the BJP and National Panthers Party (NPP) protesting in the strongest terms and insisting that as per Section 3 of the

Constitution, Jammu and Kashmir is and shall remain an integral part of India. To Syed Ali Shah Geelani, it was an endorsement of his party's stand.

The violence has also exposed the fallacy in the assertion that a decent turnout in the 2008 state elections was an endorsement of Indian rule. For decades, India has deployed more troops in Kashmir than the Western coalition forces have in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has rightly pointed out that Kashmir requires a sustained dialogue. But a dialogue devoid of sincerity is counterproductive. There can be no lasting solution without taking Pakistan on board; and the need of the hour is to look for lasting solutions instead of short term crisis management.

Pakistan too needs to devise a strategy that reflects its own as well as Kashmiri aspirations. It is worth mentioning that the uprising has received considerable coverage in the international media. However, apart from a few statements issued by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the utter silence of leaders is deplorable. Pakistan has announced on a number of occasions that it would continue to support its Kashmiri brethren politically and diplomatically, but it too needs to come up with a coherent and sustained policy.

Asymmetries in the current protests, weakness of Indian response and the actions of security forces as a precursor are facts that need to be highlighted and have been done so by an increasing number of analysts, as well as by Pakistan on a number of platforms.<sup>48</sup> A basic, perhaps even justifiable reason for widespread unrest is the years of reported and unreported injustice and harassment at the hands of security forces that is an everyday reality for Kashmiris.

Youthful vigour with perceptions of honour is a resilient motivator. While stones do not kill, they send a message across. And even when bullets kill, there are plenty of people to take up the cause as more join in at the loss of their brethren. What needs to be brought up then is a realization of injustice that is continued without an understanding of the mindsets it leads to and the reactions that follow. And with that missing from the discourse on Kashmir, an end to the protests will only be temporary. If azadi remains just another word for nothing left to lose, as has been asserted, then the Indian government is likely to face stronger reprisals in future.

## Notes and references

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