

Hubris of Propaganda on Kashmir

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Yet another Prime Minister has tried to “solve” the Kashmir problem by throwing money at it. Security experts, in parallel, have started talking about the influence of the Islamic State in radicalising Kashmir’s youth. What this indicates is that the Indian establishment is unwilling to learn from its own past mistakes and remains trapped in the hubris of its own propaganda.

The trouble with “strong” right-wing leaders is not that they are their own worst enemy but that they exacerbate a problem they claim to know better and, in the process add a few more twists to it. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared, before a captive audience in Srinagar on 7 November 2015 that he did not “need anybody’s advice on Kashmir,” not only did he snub his “good friend” Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed but displayed his arrogance for all to behold. He went on to compound it by handing out an economic package and promising that “the treasury is open for more,” thereby casting himself as a magnanimous ruler.

The poverty of understanding the Kashmir dispute stood out, while the Prime Minister chose to remain indifferent to the lawlessness of the Hindutva cohorts who feel empowered with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) ascendancy. The attack inside the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Legislative Assembly on legislators, followed by murderous assaults on Kashmiri Muslims in Jammu riled many an Indian. The very same Hindutva groups, responsible for heinous and divisive crimes, were allowed to brandish their weapons across the Jammu region, which is officially classified as a “Disturbed Area.”

The Prime Minister was also cruelly indifferent to the delay of 14 months in announcing a relief and rehabilitation package for the survivors of the devastating flood of September 2014. The provision of a miserly Rs 4,378 crore, against the Rs 44,000 crore that the state government had asked for, reflects the hiatus between the make-believe world of propaganda and the oppressive reality of J&K.

Tunnel Vision

It is increasingly evident, even within the “Establishment,” that economic packages have lost their allure. The former National

Security Adviser, MKNarayanan, recently wrote in the *Hindu* (2015) dismissing the view that alienation can be overcome with economic development, calling it an “illusion.” He is sceptical of coalition and alliances being able to overcome “fundamental” differences, and questions the Peoples Democratic Party’s, especially its heir apparent Mehbooba Mufti’s, commitment to India.

He concluded by advancing the astounding claim that the appeal of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the “radicalisation” of youth in the Valley is the “real danger” in J&K. It is typical of the national security apparatus’s tunnel vision that he looks far and beyond for identifying a threat, while refusing to see any connection to developments closer home. If deployment of a predominately non-Muslim armed force in a Muslim majority state—where its personnel enjoy the power of life and death—was not enough, the incendiary agitation unleashed by Hindutva forces in Jammu and the fear and insecurity that has been aroused among Muslims and Hindus alike is given short shrift.

Every Prime Minister announces his own “economic package,” promoting the case that all that needs to be done is to remedy people’s alienation through promise of an economic package. What further accentuates the divide is that whereas the pain and anguish of Kashmiri Pandits is considered to be official India’s principal concern to ameliorate, it is actually used to cast aspersion against the Muslims of Kashmir in order to suppress the failure of the Indian state in its primary duty to protect all its citizens. When the plight of the migrants being driven away by insecurity and fear gets mixed with claims of Kashmiri Muslim-driven “ethnic cleansing,” it is to deny any legitimacy of the demand for *azaadi*.

The many layered sufferings which make up the tragic conditions in J&K, including heinous crimes committed by government forces against the civilians, project the dissidents only as Islamists. The rigorous and meticulously researched documentation of heinous crimes, collected and collated by Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society is met by conspicuous silence.¹ If such heinous

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crimes, as have been documented here, come wrapped in the national flag mouthing “nationalist” jargon, we choose to become mute. There is a fondness for claiming that the state must have a “monopoly over instruments of coercion;” when this monopolist uses it to target Muslims, it is then that the vacuity of such preaching becomes obvious.

State Complicity with Hindutva

For all our claims to being a constitutional republic, we remain indifferent even to demand an end to legal immunity for the armed forces and ensuring the jurisdictional supremacy of criminal courts over the armed forces when they are deployed against our republic’s citizens. The predominant thread of official discourse on Kashmir has been to evade India’s own role in the making of the Kashmir crisis, by blaming Pakistan and now the ISIS, and to forever harp about Islamist radicalisation. Indians, therefore, remained oblivious to the spread of Hindu communalism among functionaries of the Indian state in J&K. That in J&K, Hindutva hoodlums today rule the roost is not a coincidence; it is an outcome of a long history of active political work by these forces and the complicity of the Indian state. In July–August 2008, these Hindutva forces imposed a month-long economic embargo to starve Kashmiri Muslims, while the armed forces of the Indian union deployed in the “Disturbed Area” did nothing to stop them.

On the other hand, it was the much maligned “separatists” who cautioned people on Bakr-Id this year not to entertain feeling of vengeance, not to hurt the sentiments of non-Muslims and to desist from cow slaughter to register their protest. Sober counsel was also offered by the “separatists” in the past when Christian institutions had come under attack from a campaign launched by pro-government Muslim religious leaders. The demonised “separatists” even held a *langar* (open kitchen) for Amarnath pilgrims in 2008 to ensure that they were looked after and sheltered during the land agitation, to send the message that theirs was not a religious war but a struggle for freedom from tyranny.

Against this context, note the running thread of the dominant discourse in the

Indian media which has been that “separatists” are marginalised—election turnout is proof of it, tourist numbers have gone up, and that but for Pakistan and its backing for “terrorists” everything would be hunky dory. Such half-truths have been touted since 2002 in one form or the other. Being a self-created myth, it comes crashing down every now and then.

So what is causing the escalation of conflict now? Why are indigenous, and not Pakistan-backed, militant groups on the ascendance? What is the political impact of the floods of September 2014, or the significance of the near contemptuous dismissal of the Prime Minister’s new “package” for flood survivors by much of Kashmir’s political opinion? What does it imply when the call for a “million march” by the “azaadi” movement was prevented from carrying it out, and placing Srinagar under curfew for 72 hours with internet links snapped? How can then it be argued that people are not with the “separatists?”

The claim of encouraging a “battle of ideas,” advanced by Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, is accompanied by every effort to muzzle speech, expression and protests. Myth gets confused with reality and reality gets sensationally mystified.

Let us recall that the security forces in Kashmir have targeted children pelting stones—some were beaten to death or shot, or blinded or physically disabled. Senior police officers of J&K came out publicly in support of this lethal approach. But they refused to open fire on people in the Jammu-based agitations, either in 2008 or in 2015, both of which had turned violent—attacking anyone who appeared to be Kashmiri, often murderously. Both in 2008 and in 2015, Hindutva agitationists attacked Muslim personnel of the J&K police force.

These perpetrators were treated with kid gloves whereas even elementary manifestations of public protests are denied to Kashmiri Muslims. Every time they protest the killings by security forces or demand justice, they are deemed “anti-nationals” maligning the glorious Indian armed forces, FIRs are recorded against them, investigations ensue, arrests take place, they are tortured in custody and threatened with dire consequences.

Remain silent or get killed is the official message to the youth of Kashmir. Rare is the instance where personnel of the armed force of the union responsible for killing civilians including children, or raping women, have been brought to justice; rarer still that they have been convicted.

On the other hand, in Jammu the security forces train and arm Bajrang Dal and Shiv Sena activists, enlisting them in village defence committees, which operate in areas with a population of both Hindus and Muslims, such as in Doda, Rajouri, Poonch, Bhaderwah and Kishtwar. How come everyone chooses to ignore this cruel reality? Or is it that democratic India subscribes to the view that criminal activities and heinous crimes can be excused if they come wrapped in the national flag, as former Governor of J&K, Lt General (retd) S K Sinha, opined in 2008 in the first Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw lecture (Navlakha 2008: 48)?

Primary Responsibility

Most significantly, we remain indifferent to straws in the wind. By exposing themselves before social media, the indigenous militants have thrown a gauntlet before the Indian government. How is it that 6,00,000 and more armed personnel, protected by draconian laws and legal immunity, cannot vanquish 150 militants? The political implication is that militants are safe among the people and that they are not afraid if their faces get known. This is not an act of bravado but an astute political message which shows to the world the support they enjoy. Former head of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), A S Dulat, put it rather well when he wrote that even an old Kashmiri woman will “tell whom she voted for but she will not give up on azaadi. Kashmiri will not accept defeat in a hurry” (Dulat 2015: 322).

Point is that we Indians can choose to look at distant thunder, shake in fear, and hastily jump into another round of military suppression of Kashmiris, or we can heed the warning that radicalisation succeeds when there is no hope for the political resolution of a festering dispute.

Therefore, the moot question before policymakers is; how come after

celebrating the alleged marginalisation of the Azaadi Movement, projecting high election turnout and tourist numbers as triumph of pro-India forces, the fizz has gone out from this heady brew? Official nationalist propaganda told us that people have exhibited their Indianness by voting and shunning the “separatists” so why is there such inflated fear over “radicalisation”? Obviously, India’s establishment is incapable of seeing from its cubbyhole its own role in bringing this situation about. They remain oblivious to the fact that by comprehensively ignoring the need for a political resolution and finding newer excuses to carry on with the tried and failed approach of shifting blame on distant events or neighbours, rather than looking closer home, they themselves are the main instigators of “separatism” and “radicalisation.”

Triumphalism to paranoia is a trajectory we have witnessed before. If we choose to remain ignorant of this we will not appreciate the truth that a falsified reality breeds intellectual and political cowardice. It would take a stout heart to expect an RSS-driven government to chart a democratic course, away from the failed policy of suppression and manipulation.

Lest anyone forget, it is the domestic conditions which play a decisive role in causing a problem to emerge and of muddying the ground through prevarication. The external factors can only fish in “troubled waters.” From 27 October 1947, India has exercised military control over J&K. The primary responsibility for failing to win the “hearts” of people who perceive themselves as victims of military occupation and opting instead for “transforming the will and attitude of the people” through coercion, remains with

India. Consequently, just as alienation cannot be won with economic packages, radicalisation cannot be prevented unless we move towards charting a new course by seeking a democratic solution. If not for anything else, then to prevent the war at home and war in the neighbourhood from becoming one seamless, long-drawn-out conflict.

NOTE

- 1 See for instance the “Reports on Mass Graves,” “Alleged Perpetrators,” “Occupational Hazard,” “Structures of Violence: The Indian State in Jammu and Kashmir,” among others on the website www.jkccs.net.

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