

ACROSS
THE AISLE

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Kashmir is more than land, it is people

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I am not surprised that the Kashmir valley is on the boil. The surprise is that it has taken so many months after the demise of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed for the people to rise in revolt.

We must define 'Kashmir'. To most people it is another state that is part of the territory of India. It may have acceded to India two months after India became independent on August 15, 1947, yet it is an integral part of India. Words are pregnant with meaning: state, territory of India, and integral part of India. The emphasis is on the land.

To some others (a discerning minority), Kashmir is the people of the Kashmir valley, all seven million of them. They acknowledge the unique history of Kashmir and the unique circumstances under which Kashmir acceded to India. The uniqueness was acknowledged by including Article 370 in the Constitution of India. The emphasis is on the people.

THE MYOPIC VIEW

For many years — and even now — governments in Delhi have taken a myopic view that the problem concerns the land (called Kashmir) and hence the land must be defended at all costs. Anything that appears to question the Indian government's sovereignty over the land would not be tolerated. India's sovereignty will be asserted, and defended, by massing troops and police forces on the land. The security forces will be given a legal shield through laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.

That is a legitimate view. It is a view

shared by many political parties (with some variations). It is also the view of the defence and other security forces.

Nevertheless, that view is a myopic view. It has not brought us closer to a solution. The distance between the people of Kashmir and the rest of India has only increased over the years. While affirming that Jammu and Kashmir (including the Kashmir valley) is a part of India, we must acknowledge that the core of the problem of Kashmir is not land but the people who live in the Kashmir valley.

AZAADI HAS MANY
MEANINGS

What do the people of Kashmir valley want? When UPA II was in government, we took an all-parties delegation to J&K. We spent two days and spent over 16 hours meeting hundreds of people from all walks of life — politicians, academics, students, youth leaders, civil society organisations and many individuals. Many of them uttered the word *azaadi*, but the meaning of that word was different to different people. It meant different things like self-determination, independence, autonomy, self-government or devolution of powers. Almost no one openly advocated seceding from India and becoming a part of Pakistan.

What one college student told us is imprinted in my memory. She wanted *azaadi* and said "Remove the security forces". We asked her "To where?" Without hesitation she said "To the India-Pakistan border". So, what is her idea of *azaadi*? She believes — and it is

implicit in her answer — that J&K is a part of India and that the India-Pakistan border must be defended by the forces, but she finds the overpowering presence of security forces oppressive, humiliating and unacceptable.

That is the impression most visitors to J&K carry with them. J&K, and particularly the Kashmir valley, looks like an occupied territory. The people think that successive governments in Delhi did not trust the people of Kashmir. Two years of hyper-nationalist rhetoric, bans prompted by majoritarian viewpoints, and polarisation on the basis of religion have only deepened the distrust.

Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was a reassuring presence and he could have bridged the trust deficit between Kashmir and the Government of India (and the rest of India). He blotted his record by forming a coalition with the BJP but, at least as long he was alive, there was a person with the stature and the moral authority to calm the agitated youth. Alas, he has passed on, the PDP-BJP coalition is limping along without a vision or direction, there is a recrudescence of terrorist incidents, and the youth of Kashmir have erupted in protest against what they perceive to be oppression and excessive use of force. It is back to the 1990s; it is certainly back to the difficult year, 2010, faced by UPA II and the government led by Mr Omar Abdullah.

GAINS LOST, WAY
FORWARD?

The positive impact of the thinning of security forces and of the splendid work done by the three-member Interlocutors Group has been nearly completely wiped out. All the gains made during 2011 to 2015 have been cancelled by the events since January 2016.

Read this assessment by a long-time observer of the Kashmir situation:

"Young Kashmiris are angry about the soldiers constantly in their midst, about the Armed Forces Special Powers Act which confers the power to kill with impunity. They want real political change, not the usual suspects who have held the levers of power for far too long. They want business opportunities, not tens of thousands of crores in generous but not job-creating government spending. They want water not oil on the fire."

Mr Chaitanya Kalbag, the author, is not opposed to the BJP or the government. His warning is prescient and points to what needs to be done. Many people feel the same way but, unfortunately, not those who are in power. Read this comment by Mr Ram Madhav, a BJP strategist and pointsman for J&K: "Government will stand firm, eruption or no eruption."

Mr Ram Madhav represents those who think that the land of Kashmir must be defended. Mr Chaitanya Kalbag represents those who think that the people of Kashmir must be won over. Between these viewpoints lies the tragedy of Kashmir.

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