



What Next after the All Party Delegation Visit? A 3-C Strategy for Kashmir

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For the last four months, Kashmir valley, in particular Srinagar has been witnessing continuous violence and curfews. Though the PM and his Home Minister have been looking for consensus and an “elusive starting point,” there are clear proposals from the mainstream in J&K where New Delhi could begin to arrest the current round of violence. Omar Abdullah, has demanded the removal of AFSPA, if not from the entire Kashmir valley, then at least from select urban towns. Many retired police officials agree to this proposition. Intellectuals from J&K have been asking for a debate on autonomy; Manmohan Singh himself had constituted a working group on this issue, which has given its recommendations.

What is New Delhi waiting for? There was an expectation that there would be a special Eid package for J&K. Unfortunately, all that New Delhi could do was to convene the Cabinet Committee on Security, which could not reach any consensus, even on the AFSPA. Finally, it was decided to send an All Party Delegation (APD) to J&K to study the ground situation and understand the various opinions obtaining.

This brief looks at the backdrop to the formation of the APD, provides a critique of its visit and explores the strategies that could be pursued hereafter.

I FROM “SIT TIGHT - DO NOTHING” APPROACH TO AN ALL PARTY DELEGATION: FINALLY, A NEW STRATEGY?

Over the last few months, there have been numerous criticisms that New Delhi does not have a long term policy vis-à-vis J&K. Perhaps, the critics do not understand that, not to have a policy is, in itself, a policy. Such a policy, although it appears bizarre to the analyst, is not irrational from New Delhi’s perspective. What needs to be examined is whether having such a negative approach, is the right course to pursue in the given environment.

A section inside the government and outside it in the security establishment, believes that the ongoing violence in the Kashmir valley will eventually subside. Statistically, one could argue that violence has become seasonal and cyclic in the last few years.

After the successful 2008 elections, the Kashmir Valley witnessed protracted violence during the Amarnath land crisis, Shopian rape case and related events. While there was always an incident, that precipitated this violence, it also subsided thereafter. So, the calculation today in New Delhi is, perhaps, that this round of violence will also subside. So sit tight. Do Nothing. Violence will go down automatically. Perhaps, it will. Perhaps this round of violence will continue till the end of the Commonwealth Games, and even extend till Obama’s visit in November. After that it may subside. So, the argument is: why pursue any strategy that will result in a compromise and may lead to further violence?

Though this appears irrationally rational, such a strategy does not augur well for India in the longer term. This is simply an abdication of responsibility to ensure order and governance in a conflict situation. Such a strategy will also demoralize the security forces, which have fought hard to bring down the militancy in J&K during the last decade. One can see from the statements and writing of retired officials belonging to the security establishment, that the gains against militancy in the last decade have been squandered by the lack of a follow-on political approach, and the failure to govern effectively and enforce accountability.

A “sit tight-do nothing-problem will subside on its own” approach does not augur well for the country. Perhaps, New Delhi will realize this later, but decided to appoint an All Party Delegation to visit J&K and understand the issue. Led by the Home Minister, this visit was seen as the most significant strategy, in the recent months.

II THE APD VISIT: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

The All Party Delegation (APD), comprised members of the ruling coalition and opposition parties, including the BJP and the Left. It was truly an APD and represented all shades of opinion at the national level. Hence there were bound to be differences in this delegation. The formation, composition and the consultations it had in J&K, was the single most important strategy that the Congress government has evolved in the last few years. This effort needs to be appreciated.

While the APD met the mainstream political groups, and business associations without any hesitation, there was a division between them in regard to meeting the separatists, led by two factions of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC). The BJP was against any meeting with the Hurriyat leaders; on their parts, the Hurriyat leaders were against meeting the APD. Fortunately, better sense prevailed; a section within the APD, primarily the Left, met Geelani, Mirwaiz and Yasin Malik – the three main separatists leaders.

What is important in this context is not where and whom the APD visited and met; equally important is where they did not go, and whom they did not meet. Unfortunately, the APD's primary consultations were only in Srinagar. It should have visited at least two towns outside Srinagar, one in the north and another in the south, ideally, Kupwara/Baramulla and Anantnag/Shopian. People outside Srinagar do have a different perspective, which also needs to be considered and addressed. After all, they were the ones who made the 2008 elections inclusive and successful. The towns of Srinagar and Sopore, which witnessed continuous violence, voted the least during 2008 elections (around 10 percent) and are considered to be the hub of separatists. The APD should therefore have visited other towns, instead of limiting their focus to Srinagar, which has a unique perspective.

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Second, the APD should also have held extensive discussions with the youth. The reality of the recent violence in Kashmir during the past four months has been its spontaneous outbreak, led by the youth. Neither Geelani nor the Mirwaiz – leaders of the two Hurriyat factions gave the initial calls or led this youth uprising. Unfortunately (and perhaps shamelessly) these leaders today are claiming credit for what the youth started and continued. So why talk only to the separatist leaders?

This does not mean that the Hurriyat is less relevant today; it only means, that the youth have become more relevant and this change, highlights an important phase in the conflict inside the Kashmir Valley. This is a spontaneous outburst, underlined by mass psychology that is goading the youth to break the curfew and indulge in stone pelting. The APD should have spent more time with the youth and students.

The APD also visited Jammu, where it heard different opinions and perspectives. If the removal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act was the primary emphasis in the Kashmir Valley, the Jammu region provided a contrary view. This is important for the APD to understand that the Kashmir issue is not confined to the Kashmir valley.

III WHAT NEXT? A 3-C STRATEGY TOWARDS KASHMIR

Undoubtedly, this was a useful visit and much needed from the perspective of the Kashmir Valley, other regions of J&K, and the national mainstream. The fact that the delegation visited Jammu to understand the feelings in other parts of J&K (outside the Valley), and the differences in perception aired there, should provide a balanced picture in terms of regional differences.

There were huge differences within the delegation, within J&K and even within the Valley. However, now is the time not to dwell on the past but to build on the recent initiative. What should be done now? New Delhi could pursue a 3-C approach.

1. Ensure Continuity and Consistency

First and foremost, the APD visit should be seen as a beginning. The Home Minister has been searching for an "elusive starting point" to break the "vicious cycle" of violence in Kashmir. This visit could very well be that starting point; New Delhi should now build on it and pursue a long term strategy. In short, this visit should not be seen as an end in itself, or a part of the fire fighting but also to understand the ground

situation.

One of the primary accusations of the Kashmir leaders – mainstream and separatists, has been that New Delhi always send a delegation or a team or sets up a one man committee whenever there is a problem, only to forget the issue subsequently. From KC Pant to NN Vohra, how many people have “broken the ice” in Kashmir during the last ten years? Forget, the last decade; how many Round Table Conferences have been organized and Working Groups formed by Manmohan Singh himself? Why does the chill continue, despite the repeated breaking of the ice?

Clearly New Delhi’s strategy lacks continuity. Let the APD visit not fall into the same category; The government should ensure continuity but also make the Kashmiris believe that New Delhi is being sincere now.

2. Evolve Consensus

Second, New Delhi should work towards building consensus at various levels—national, within J&K and finally inside Kashmir valley.

A. National Consensus: As seen from the different statements within the APD itself, there is a divide at the national level, on the strategies which need to be pursued vis-à-vis J&K. This is not unusual in a democracy like India, and should not be seen as its weakness. There is a consensus at the national level, that the state of J&K and its people should be physically and emotionally integrated with the rest of India. This basic understanding should be used to build consensus at the national level, on strategies to be pursued in J&K. The onus is on the Union government to build this consensus both in Parliament and outside.

The BJP has a particular perspective; its maximalist position is the abrogation of Article 370, which provides special powers to J&K, but in reality, it is willing to dilute its stand. Removal of AFSPA and demilitarization – are two specific issues on which the BJP has a different perspective vis-à-vis other political parties. Though the BJP rhetoric holds that any negotiation with the separatists will be against the national interests, this should not be a major concern. The BJP’s political interests in Jammu and Ladakh (now reinforced by the recent induction of the LUTF members in Leh, before the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council elections) will play an important role in shaping its national policy vis-à-vis Kashmir. The Union government will have to work harder to reach a national consensus. Tough, but not impossible.

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B. Regional Consensus in J&K: Apart from a national consensus, New Delhi should also work towards building consensus within J&K. Numerous beginnings have been made, but only to be abandoned. The Round Table Conferences and Working Groups, clearly was a great strategy; in fact, they were able to build an element of consensus within J&K. Unfortunately, this process was discontinued and today there are clear fault-lines between the three regions, further exacerbated by the Amranath Shrine land crisis. New Delhi should also encourage the State government and non-governmental organization to bring together various stakeholders to evolve a consensus from below. The Regional Autonomy Committee in J&K was a great beginning; like numerous other reports, however, the RAC report has also been shelved.

A “Kashmiri” consensus, is tough, but, again, not impossible. There are three distinct regions (Jammu, Kashmir Valley, and Ladakh) with numerous sub-regions (Rajouri Poonch and Doda in Jammu; South and North Kashmir, besides Srinagar and Sopore in the Valley; Leh and Kargil in Ladakh). The three regions are not monolithic, nor are the communities that live there; comprising Hindus, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists. Besides there are Pahari, Gujjar, Dogra and Balti identities, which are also divided. The political parties – the NC, PDP, Congress and BJP represent different sections, cutting across regional and religious divides. A major accusation in Jammu and Ladakh regions has been that New Delhi listens to and appeases only the people in the Kashmir Valley, while ignoring them.

Despite these differences, the regional consensus within J&K is not difficult to reach. Given the differences and deep fault lines, between the regions, political actors and religious communities in J&K, this consensus will never be complete or unanimous. But, there has been consensus in the past; the Regional Autonomy Committee report, in fact, was an expression of this regional consensus, which could be reviewed again. Though it does not enjoy unanimous approval in J&K, it provides a blue print for how the sub regions could cooperate in future.

C. Consensus within Kashmir Valley: Finally, New Delhi should also try to build consensus within the Kashmir Valley. Three major stakeholders - National Conference, PDP and the Hurriyat are deeply divided between themselves. While the mainstream political parties – the NC and PDP do not want to work together and want to replace each other at any cost, the Hurriyat does not want to engage in any overt dialogue with the other two. Given their stakes and their political constituencies, one should understand this intransigence. Over the years, the Hurriyat has pursued a particular path; it will be extremely difficult to completely change. In fact, it found it extremely difficult to reverse its policy after Musharraf took a U-turn on J&K and started emphasizing cross-LoC interactions. More importantly, the youth are forcing the Hurriyat to make a decision today, on leading them. This is a significant change in 2010; every stakeholder within and outside Kashmir will take time to understand the implications of this change .

The PDP has been pursuing a different course of action – soft separatism. They will speak with the separatist voice, but will remain a mainstream party. This will remain the political strategy of the PDP, and remains essential for their survival. With the youth leading the violence in the Valley, and Mehbooba taking charge of the party (instead of being led by her father), she would like to tap this youth force by making provocative slogans against New Delhi. This will remain PDP's constituency and they will not go against it.

The NC is the only party, which has a stated programme and a strategy in terms of autonomy. Unfortunately, this strategy has not yielded any dividends vis-à-vis New Delhi, hence also vis-à-vis the Kashmiris. While Mehbooba can tap the youth in the Valley, Omar Abdullah cannot do so. His party's leadership is now in their 60s and 70s and seen by most inside Kashmiris as old and corrupt. As compared to Mehbooba, Omar is not a shrewd political leader, though he is seen as a good human being. His support base comes primarily from 10, Janpath. Hence, he cannot afford to take bold decisions, expecting New Delhi to bat for him.

Besides the above three, today, the Kashmiri youth is emerging as a new actor, whose reactions appear spontaneous.

Despite these differences in perceptions and the support base of the major stakeholders in Kashmir valley, New Delhi could work silently and through non-governmental organizations to build a consensus within Kashmir. Changing the regime, more importantly overthrowing the NC, and replacing it with the PDP is an option available for New Delhi, but should be resisted. The answer lies in evolving a

consensus at all three levels and not in changing regimes.

3. Consolidate and Build Confidence

Third and most importantly, New Delhi should consolidate the gains of the APD visit. This could be done through some confidence building measures. A primary issue, on which there is convergence between the stone throwing Kashmir youth, NC, PDP and the Hurriyat, relates to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. A similar convergence exists in the demand for demilitarization.

Armed Forces Special Powers Act and Demilitarization: While the Kashmiris believe the AFSPA to be inhuman and draconian, many in the Army believe that the real problem lies elsewhere. Many senior police officials and administrators in J&K agree that there could be a phased withdrawal of the AFSPA, at least from those areas where the local police and the CRPF are confident that they could perform their duties without this Act. In such places, where the security is being handled by the local Police and the CRPF, the AFSPA could be withdrawn; so could the Army. Phased withdrawal of the AFSPA and military from selected areas will address the two main demands of the local population. Today, both the AFSPA and demilitarization have become a political issue; a phased withdrawal of both could be a great confidence building measure. This will also address the next major Kashmiri criticism that New Delhi's policies lack continuity and consistency.

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission?: Professor Amitabh Mattoo has suggested a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, on the model of the South African commission on this issue. According to him, this strategy is not "about fixing the blame, but about accepting the tragic events of the past, bringing the past to a closure and moving together into a better future." This effort will truly be a confidence building measure not only between New Delhi and Kashmir, but also between the various communities within J&K. This should not be seen as symptom of weakness; but a show of maturity and confidence, and more importantly, accountability and governance.

Let New Delhi consolidate the gains of the APD visit by building confidence and thereby ensuring continuity.



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