

**Kashmir: New Initiatives, New Hopes**

Arjimand Hussain Talib\*

*\*Arjimand Hussain Talib is a young Journalist working with the daily Greater Kashmir, Srinagar, India.*

Initiation of a political dialogue on Kashmir, involving all the three parties concerned - India, Pakistan and the people of Jammu & Kashmir - has always remained a complex task. One of the prime reasons for a meaningful dialogue on the Kashmir issue remaining elusive is the question of representation and regional political aspirations in the State of Jammu & Kashmir, which quite often bring to the fore mutually conflicting perspectives.

The lack of coherence of the Kashmiri voice (an euphemism used for the collective political view-point of all the three regions of Jammu & Kashmir) has been a major stumbling block in the way of a dialogue process. Before a meaningful dialogue can be initiated, it is, therefore, imperative that the question of representation of the whole J&K State is addressed through, what the APHC calls, an intra-Kashmir political dialogue. Although the political stands of at least two parties - India and Pakistan - are well-known on the issue, however, owing to deep religious and geo-political polarisation, the disputed entity of the erstwhile princely State of Jammu & Kashmir, as what stood on 1947, has not been able to come up with a consensual agenda for a permanent solution to the issue. One complex matter relates to the conflicting political perspectives of the three main regions of the Indian-administered Kashmir viz. Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh.

However, the secessionist camp that spearheads the movement for secession from India holds the view that the two regions of Jammu and Ladakh, although inseparable, constitute "two insignificant" political entities in terms of the population and cannot veto the aspirations of the majority population. The complexity of representation is compounded by the religious element of the issue that co-incidentally also comes to vindicate the two-nation theory propounded in the sub-continent at the time of its Partition. That there is a divergence in political viewpoints in the State based on polarisation on religious and not even regional lines cannot be denied. For instance, while the Buddhist-dominated Ladakh region does not support the Kashmiri demand of azadi, there are pockets of Muslim population in the region that are not averse to such a possibility. Similarly, the Muslim-dominated areas of Doda, Udhampur, Poonch and Rajouri in the Jammu

region do not subscribe to the political ideology of the Hindus of the region, who, in a slight majority in that region, remain committed to accession to or complete merger with India. While the majority of the people in the Muslim-majority Kashmir region largely does not accept the State's accession to the Indian union as the final solution, the minority groups of the region, like the Pandits and the Sikhs, do not support the Muslim-Kashmir's political view-point.

As a matter of fact, if this deep polarisation within regions on religious lines in Jammu & Kashmir remains unaddressed there are little prospects of a meaningful tripartite or Indo-Kashmir dialogue process taking a practical shape. Notwithstanding the questions over the representative character of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, it, atleast, has come to be treated as the representative body of the sentiment of *aazadi*, that manifested itself in a violent armed campaign in the late 80s in Kashmir. Although the government of India does recognise the prevalence of political dissent in Jammu & Kashmir, it does not see any Pakistani locus standi in addressing that dissent - which it sees as an internal problem.

However, Pakistan's continued support to that sentiment of dissent, the fact that a large part of the State is in its control and that close to a million migrant Kashmiris live in that country, the inevitability of the third party to the dispute cannot be wished away. New Delhi's continuous reluctance in recognising the issue as a trilateral one, naturally, amounts to rejection of a plain reality. Although it remains open to an internal dialogue with the Kashmiri groups spearheading a campaign for self-determination, its aversion to Islamabad's inclusion in any such set-up is guided by the same policy: no trilateralism on Kashmir. Although New Delhi has been seeking a dialogue with Islamabad at a different plane, in the spirit of bilateralism, minus the Kashmiri component, the rejection of such a set-up by the Kashmiri component leads to the same—a deadlock. So what could help in coming out of the present dialogue?

Given the complexity of a formal dialogue at the political level, there have been a number of initiatives about Kashmir over the last few years, notably the ones having been taken at the track II level for facilitating a negotiated settlement of the Kashmir issue. However, what has seen the failure of such initiatives at the very outset is the absence of a collective Kashmiri voice. That aspect was addressed in a first-of-its-kind Round Table Conference on Kashmir with the theme "Kashmir: The Way Out", organised by Mr. O P Shah and founder-editor of the Jammu-based *Kashmir Times* under the auspices of the *Centre for Peace and Progress*.

The Conference among others was attended by senior Hurriyat leader, Abdul Gani Lone, Mehbooba Mufti of the People's Democratic Party, Shabir Ahmed Shah of the Democratic

Freedom Party, former NC leader, Saif-ud-din Soz, the President of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, Tsering Samphal, Anwar Chowdhary of the J&K Gujjar's United Front and Ajay Chirangoo of the Panun Kashmir. What additionally gave a unique tinge to the conference was the presence of the veteran parliamentarian, Ram Jethmalani, who also chaired the meet.

That the conference provided the first and unique opportunity to listen to the civil society voices, and also key political forces of the State, is beyond doubt. The address of the Hurriyat leader, Abdul Gani Lone, proved very fruitful in erasing some misconceptions about the political ideology of the amalgam. Lone's rationale about the Hurriyat's intended visit to Pakistan and the Pak-administered Kashmir in what he said an attempt to persuade the militant groups and also the Pakistani establishment for a broad-based and multilateral cease-fire in Jammu & Kashmir, found many takers. Lone also disclosed that the Hurriyat has been informally engaged in a dialogue at many levels with the government of India, but "shadowy forces" were thwarting all such moves. He also explicitly named India's intelligence agencies for playing "spoilsport". The Lone-contention that the Hurriyat respects the political sentiments of all the regions of the State and also that it does not recognise itself as the sole representative of the Jammu & Kashmir State seemed to have assuaged the feelings of the representatives of other regions in a considerable manner. Lone also detailed what he called "the history of betrayals and mistrust" of New Delhi in Jammu & Kashmir.

During the conference it also became clear that the demand for a separate State of Jammu is confined to the Jammu Mukti Morcha, which does not wield significant political clout in the region. The opposition from the representatives of the regions of Poonch, Rajouri and Doda, and also of the Gujjar representatives to the demand for a separate State for Jammu highlighted the fissures in the Jammu region as well. What came as a surprise during the conference was the revelation that the National Conference-led government in the State intends to introduce a bill in the coming assembly session for creating an Autonomous Hill Development Council for the Muslim-dominated districts of Doda, Rajouri and Poonch in the Jammu region. The opposition to such a plan from the mainstream parties of Jammu was discernible. In the end, what became clear is that unless there is some initiative to bridge the deep inter-regional political differences in the State, any dialogue, whether internal, or a trilateral one involving Pakistan, would remain elusive. There is no easy way out from the quagmire of uncertainty and confusion that the State of Jammu & Kashmir has been caught up in.