

Conflict Transformation in Kashmir-II

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Backdrop

The meeting between Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Manmohan Singh and separatist conglomerate in Kashmir, All Party Hurriyat Conference (F) or APHC (F) on 5th September, 2005 has provided a boost to the process of conflict transformation in Kashmir. The meeting which is reported to have started with the exchange of popular Urdu couplets concluded on an agreement of “step-by-step” approach.[1] According to a press release issued by the Prime Minister’s Office, the Prime Minister underlined his commitment to ensuring a life of peace, self respect and dignity for the people of Kashmir and ensuring that human rights violations would not be tolerated.[2]

The details of the meeting provided by the media clearly indicate a shift in the APHC’s maximalist position of conflict resolution to strengthening the processes of conflict transformation. It is encouraging to note that the visiting separatist group acknowledged that they got a positive response from the Government which would go a long way in creating trust and confidence among the separatist political groupings in Kashmir. The two main demands of APHC, viz; release of detainees and reduction of security forces from the civilian areas were received positively by the Prime Minister. He is reported to have assured the APHC leaders that the process of review of the cases of detainees would be accelerated. However, he is reported to have related the decision of reduction of security forces to the cessation of violence and an end to infiltration from across the border. He is reported to have reminded the separatist group of their responsibility in ensuring the creation of an atmosphere of peace. The APHC leaders are reported to have made the assurance that they would be making their contribution in restoring peace in society. The APHC leaders also concurred with the Prime Minister that in order to move towards the resolution of Kashmir, the consensus among different regions in Jammu & Kashmir was a *sine qua non*

Changing Scenario

It may be recognized that freedom of thought and expression becomes the first casualty in the situations of conflict. Moreover, the proliferation of small arms in society accentuates the processes of suppression of free expression. In order to create an environment of terror and fear, the channels of communication are clogged to promote a uni dimensional thought process in the society. It is equally ironical that many a violent movement, initially, is launched as a protest against the restrictions on freedom of thought and expression. But gradually these very movements acquire the same coercive techniques which had been the take off point of their protest. It happened in Kashmir too. With the onset of insurgency, the restrictions were placed on the free expression particularly on the local print media. The intellectuals, academics and activists were dictated to tender public apologies for holding their ideologies and directing them to fall in the line in supporting the militancy. These public apologies which appeared in the local media provide an interesting historical record for analysis. Thus, the diktat shrunk the scope for any dissent in Kashmir and subjected the free expression to the approval of gun wielding persons in the society. It created a social anarchy with horrible social consequences. Since this situation was gradually moving toward anarchic levels, it provided the state a justification in using force to deal with the situation. Moreover, many local journalists lost their lives at the hands of 'unidentified gunmen' or in the crossfire between the militants and security forces.

Thus, the restoration of free speech and expression is the first requirement for the reconciliation and conflict transformation in J&K state. In this behalf, a new beginning was recently made by a Srinagar based NGO, *Coalition of Civil Society*, which invited two leaders from two different schools of thought for a free and frank interaction. The two leaders, one representing the separatist group, Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), and the other representing the mainstream regional political party, Jammu & Kashmir National Conference (NC), participated in the interaction. The interaction, apart from exchange of ideas between these two leaders, provided the members of civil society also an occasion to participate in a free discourse, which centered round the theme of '*This is how we perceive the problem of Kashmir: People's Vision*'.^[3] This interaction brought forth the perceptions, positions, visions and responses of political and social actors across the board in Kashmir. It also provided the glimpses to locate the genesis of militancy and violence in Kashmir.

Perception one: Azadi (freedom)

The leader of Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), Mr. Mohammad Yasin Malik, whose group introduced the militant movement in Kashmir underlined that he himself alongwith his group had renounced violence (since 1994) and had taken to Gandhian ideology of non -violence to achieve their objective of creating an 'Independent Kashmir'. The JKLF leader's assertions unfolded gradually during the interaction which may be categorized into three parts, (a) the accumulated grievances over a period of time, (b) failure of leadership in Kashmir, (c) vision for the future. He makes an interesting revelation that he, his family and his entire habitat had a mainstream National Conference Party (NC) background. He also claims that his other colleagues (comrades-in-arm) who led the militancy in the initial stage in 1990 were from the same political background.

According to him, the disenchantment started with the Indira Gandhi- Shiekh Abdullah Accord of 1975[4] which was resented by a large number of NC party workers who later joined the "*revolution*" (militancy). He questions the credibility of NC leadership's claim of fighting for autonomy of the state. He maintains that the sincerity of NC leadership was put to test when NC did not resign after its resolution of autonomy, passed by the state assembly, was rejected by the Union government led by the NDA. He laments on the crisis of political leadership in Kashmir and holds the view that all mainstream leaders do not represent the people of Kashmir and they toed the line prescribed by the government at the Centre. However, he equally acknowledges that APHC was a divided house. In the meanwhile, he does not identify the genuine leadership of Kashmir and Kashmiris.

In projecting a vision of Kashmir, Mr. Malik wishes to recreate the Jammu & Kashmir state as it existed before 1947 when it got divided first into two and later into three parts due to the tribal invasion from Pakistan. Mr. Malik wishes to integrate the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) with the Pakistan occupied Kashmir (POK) and the Gilgit-Baltistan areas which were truncated by Pakistan from its occupied part of J&K and re-designated as Northern Areas. The JKLF leader envisions the sustenance of such a state on the basis of water resources abundantly available in J&K state. He proudly mentions that 'highly talented people of Kashmir' would be able to manage these resources to usher the state into a great economic revolution and is confident that the state would not be dependent on any outside help. He recognizes that the wishes and the aspirations of the people of other regions of the state, viz; Jammu and Ladakh should be ascertained and accommodated and according to him he was

reaching out to these areas. He claims that he was proud of his Kashmir identity which was essentially a secular identity.

Perception Two: Autonomy

The NC leader, Mr. Omar Abdullah's responses may be divided into four parts as: (a) solution to the problem, (b) agenda and achievement of the separatist movement, (c) genesis of militancy (d) vision for Kashmir.

At the very outset, Mr. Omar Abdullah made it clear that unless India and Pakistan agreed, the status of Jammu & Kashmir was not going to change. He proposed that as a pragmatic person, he believed that the best solution to Kashmir imbroglio was to grant maximum autonomy to both the Kashmiris and make the Line of Control (LOC) dividing the state of J&K as a soft border. He said that the Irish Republican Army waged a disciplined armed struggle for thirty years without targeting their own people unlike Kashmir, ultimately had to lay down their arms without changing the map of Ireland. According to him, Kashmir had seen death and devastation for sixteen years and nothing had changed and in another sixteen years nothing was going to change. He said that there was a sentiment for *Azadi* (freedom) but one had to take cognizance of ground realities. He inquired about the rationale of a militant movement which had consumed thousands of people and said that his grandfather (Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah) had strained relations with the Centre for 22 years, and he had suffered even long periods of incarceration, but never advised his people to pick up guns.

Mr. Omar Abdullah, responding to the hypothesis that Indira-Abdullah Accord of 1975 provided the genesis for militancy, made interesting observations. He said that people of his own and Mr. Yasin Malik's age were too young in 1975 to comprehend the significance of the Accord. Moreover, Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah was overwhelmingly returned to power post-Accord in one of the free and fair elections held in the state. That should end the debate that Accord was responsible for the disenchantment of the people. Moreover, Mr. Omar Abdullah pointed out, that Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah had proved through the ballot that he was the real representative of the people despite machinations and conspiracies which were hatched to show him down. Responding to the remark that in the face of the rejection of Autonomy resolution by the then Union government, the NC government continued in office, Mr. Omar Abdullah said that Mr. Malik's *Azadi* formula had been rejected by both, India as well as Pakistan, and he was still harping on the same. Therefore, why should he give up

his struggle on Autonomy which was well within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

He said that the concept of *Azadi* (freedom) as advocated by JKLF was vague because it was not clear whether this freedom was meant for Indian part of J&K or for certain districts of J&K or for the part of Kashmir under the occupation of Pakistan as well. And was Pakistan ready to give freedom to the Kashmir under its control? He said that some solutions were being proposed without any basis and a proper explanation which were at best the "hollow slogans", for instance, *Azadi, Joint Sovereignty, United States of Kashmir*. In response to the proposition of taking the control of water resources of Kashmir, Mr. Omar wondered that if Pakistan was raising a hue and cry on a run-of-the-river hydro-electric project in Baglihar, what would be its response in divesting its control over the entire resources?

Mr. Omar Abdullah said that he had a vision for the state to bring in technological revolution and attract investments so that the problem of educated unemployed persons could be effectively addressed. He said that he has been encouraging a dialogue between the separatist conglomerate and the Union Government. However, there was a lack of agreement on the part of separatist groups on a common agenda to be pursued. Moreover, they continued fighting among themselves. He lamented on the absence of a common political leadership in Kashmir.

Perception Three: View from Across the LoC

The senior most living leader, who has been 'Prime Minister' and 'President' of 'Azad Jammu & Kashmir' (POK) at different times, Sardar Mohd. Abdul Qayyum Khan visited Delhi in the third week of September, 2005 along with a group of political leaders belonging to different political parties in POK. The visit was aimed at having "heart-to-heart" talks with the eminent people of different shades of political opinion including the eminent public figures from J&K. One representative of APHC (F) also participated in these interactions.

Sardar M. Abdul Qayyum Khan expressed his satisfaction on the peace process between India and Pakistan and said that his visit to India after fifty long years was in itself a Confidence Building Measure.

Responding to the proposal of an 'Independent Kashmir', Mr. Khan said the concept of an Independent Kashmir "is a mental luxury and it is neither feasible

nor possible".[5] He said that the "dream of a sovereign Kashmir could not be fulfilled in the next hundred years".[6]

Mr. Khan made an interesting observation that he was not averse to the return of autocratic rule in J&K. He said "let it be *Maharaja's* rule. It is a lesser evil, if you would call it. It is better than the whole region being on fire." [7] Ironically, it is coming from a person who was the first to engineer a revolt in Maharaja's army in 1947 which was followed by a tribal invasion from Pakistan and got later converted into an India-Pakistan war.

Mr. Khan proposed that greater autonomy to both the Kashmirs with a soft border between the two Kashmirs could be the immediate solution.[8] He even proposed that the POK political model could be considered for J&K.[9]

Conclusion

The foregoing interaction between the leaders of a popular political party, NC, which has a political career spanning over 75 years in J&K and a separatist group, JKLF, which came to the fore in Kashmir about fifteen years ago fighting for freedom (whatever that means) reveals different perspectives of the political actors in J&K. The interaction also provides some clues to the genesis of conflict in Kashmir. From the perspective of Peace and Conflict Resolution in Kashmir, these perspectives help in evolving the processes of reconciliation. The perspective from POK adds an interesting dimension. However it is still relevant to locate the roots of the conflict internally as well as externally. In this regard, the first issue which needs to be addressed is the nature of grievances and the response of the system to these grievances, real or imagined, of the people in Kashmir.

The Indira Gandhi- Shiekh Abdullah Accord of 1975 has been referred by the JKLF leader to be at the root of the disenchantment of the people in Kashmir. In a recent presentation, a former militant commander, Firdous Sayed, who was heading the militant group *Muslim Janbaz Force* under an assumed name of Babar Badar, also traces the roots of militancy to the Accord.[10] According to him, the perception was prevalent that the Accord which merely installed Shiekh Mohd. Abdullah back to the power disappointed the people who were expecting to get back the pre 1964 political status which is generally referred as pre 1953 position. It may be mentioned that nomenclature of the Governor and Chief Minister for J&K was adopted in 1964 and many central laws extending the jurisdiction of certain national institutions were extended to J&K in 1964 on the recommendations of the J&K Assembly.

In case the argument of Accord as a source of conflict is valid, then how does one respond to the explanation of Mr. Omar Abdullah that the people who initiated the militancy were too young to comprehend the implications of Accord. In the similar vein, how does one explain the overwhelming reception which Sheikh received after signing the Accord on his return to Kashmir or his victory in the 1977 elections. Firdous Sayed argues that a generation had come up which were fed on the slogans of '*self-determination*' and '*plebiscite*' and they could not come to terms with the Accord. The fact remains that Shiekh Mohd. Abdullah did not prepare enough ground to explain the rationale of Accord to the people in Kashmir. However, Shiekh had a history behind him and he had earned a credibility among the people on account of his long struggle to empower them politically and economically which he was able to achieve with great success. Hence, a miniscule anti-Accord minority could not become a movement to challenge the Shiekh. The only known Plebiscite Front leader, Sufi Mohd. Akbar, parted company with NC on the issue of Accord which, however, did not raise even a whimper. The people of his own constituency, Sopore (which later became the strong den of militancy), did not observe even a shut down on his death to express their gratitude to him. Therefore, the Accord does not appear to be a potent ground to explain the sources of conflict in Kashmir. In the same manner, the 1983 elections fought by Dr. Farooq Abdullah, after the death of his father, Shiekh Mohd. Abdullah, was a watershed. Dr. Abdullah, who had the complete backing of the National opposition parties, particularly the left, mobilized people in the state in much larger numbers than his father was able to do to project an image that he represented the people in the state and he could not be dictated by the Centre. He won hands down. However, within two years, twelve members of his own party led by his estranged brother-in-law, Mr. G.M. Shah defected, to form a new government with the support of Congress party. The general perception prevails that the defection was engineered by the Congress party.[11] Be that as it may, the people did not let the new government function and rallied behind the NC led by Dr. Farooq Abdullah. This development was to a greater extent responsible for the erosion of the faith of the people in the functioning of democracy in Kashmir, although such dramas had been enacted in other parts of the country as well. It is interesting to point out that in this subversion of democracy, the core constituency of JKLF leader, Mr. Mohd. Yasin Malik, Maisuma locality in Srinagar (JKLF head-quarters are located in this area) came out in open support of Mr. G. M. Shah. The majority of the people in this locality who are in the transport business had been the ardent supporters of NC. The argument that Accord had alienated people falls flat in view of this development. Did this section of Kashmir society support defectors due to factional affiliation ? Was

this section seeking some favors as an economic -interest - group? Or was this section seeking accommodation of its representatives in the political dispensation? The later developments indicate that it was the issue of the accommodation of the representative of this section of society in the political dispensation in the state.

It is ironical that while the National opposition parties were planning the national level protests against the political developments in Kashmir, the NC leadership went into hibernation. This political methodology, apart from being the right course, would have opened the avenues of integrating the people, particularly the youth of Kashmir, in the larger democratic framework of the country. However, the NC party went into a phase of dormancy only to re-emerge with a fresh Rajiv Gandhi - Farooq Abdullah Accord which provided that NC led by Dr. Farooq Abdullah would contest the new elections in alliance with the Congress party. In order to challenge this alliance, a new grouping, Muslim United Front (MUF) was formed in 1987 which had diverse elements, including even the mainstream political leaders, in its ranks. However, this grouping had a pronounced Islamist ideology as opposed to the sub-nationalist ideology of NC. Some Congress leaders maintain that the former Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi had advised the NC leaders to accord the opposition in Kashmir its due space which was not adhered to due to the internal adjustment problems of the NC party. This election, as widely recognized, was rigged in the most brazen faced manner in the post-Accord history of J&K. It may be mentioned here that JKLF leader, Mr. Mohd. Yasin Malik, was the polling agent of one of the candidates of MUF grouping who was contesting the election from Amirakadal constituency of Srinagar. This candidate who was announced to have lost the election had been declared elected by the returning officer. It is significant to note that this very candidate who had contested elections as Mohd. Yousuf Shah crossed over to POK and became the 'Chief Commander' of Hizbul Mujahideen militant group and assumed the name of Syed Salahuddin.

It may be noted that by the time Shiekh Mohd. Abdullah returned to power in 1975, the National Conference as a dominant political party of J&K state, had lost much of its ideological sheen and it was gradually acquiring machine like qualities. By 1987, the NC had become a machine mainly engaged in the distribution of power and privileges. Moreover, the bureaucracy had taken general control of political functioning which remained the hallmark of the party post 1996 when it was returned to power.

The dissent in Kashmir generally evoked sharp responses from the government. It may be noted that these dissenting voices also did not always adhere to the rules of the game and their pronouncements were often couched in the nuances of extra-territorial affections and expectations. It is interesting to note that most of the political parties, except the Jamaat-I-Islami, have sprung from the mainstream NC party.

To conclude, the roots of the conflict in Kashmir may be traced to the malfunctioning of democratic institutions and the decadence which had crept in the functioning of political party system in the state. The dominant political party equally ignored the newly emerging interest groups in Kashmir and sidelined their urges for political accommodation. The estrangement of the group of fruit-growers of Sopore (at one point of time Sopore was called small London in view of its growing prosperity), who had been the great beneficiaries of land reforms and the liberal horticultural development policy of the state, and their drift from NC to Jamaat-I-Islami, provides an illustration to the point. It is axiomatic that a conflict may manifest in one garb but its roots lay some where else. The processes of reconciliation and conflict transformation need to reach out to these roots.

The turmoil in Kashmir has external linkages too. (*To be continued*)

Endnotes

1. *The Asian Age*, 7th September, 2005.
2. *The Indian Express, Hindustan Times*, 6th September, 2005.
3. The transcript of this interaction was carried by the local English daily, *Greater Kashmir*, August 21-25, 2005.
4. Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah, the most popular leader of J&K who had played a pivotal role in the accession of J&K State with the Union of India in 1947, had strained relations with the Union since 1953 when his government was dismissed and he was subsequently arrested.

The tension was created with the violent agitation of a Jammu based Hindu fundamentalist group, Praja Parishad, supported by the National right wing Hindu party, Jana Sangh (later BJP) demanding the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution of India which granted special status to J&K. Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah responded with provocative political statements which gave the

impression that he was challenging the state's accession with the Union. In retrospect, it seems that Sheikh's responses were an over-reaction which lacked political wisdom and foresight. The Constitution of India had come into force and there was no way that the Article 370 could be tampered with. Moreover, a formula which is known as 'Delhi Agreement' defining the areas between the Union and the J&K state was worked out in 1952 and subsequently announced and approved in the Union Parliament. The constituent assembly of J&K was drawing up a constitution for the internal governance of the J&K state. Under these circumstances the political behaviour of Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah (1952-1953) remains mysterious, to say the least.

However, Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah returned to the national mainstream in 1975 after 22 years of estrangement by virtue of an accord with the then Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi which is known as 'Indira Gandhi - Sheikh Abdullah Accord' of 1975. Later, Sheikh explained that the quantum of autonomy was the reason of his estrangement with the Centre. This, however, is not borne by the facts.

5. www.Rediff.com, 26th September, 2005.
6. *The Times of India*, 26th September, 2005.
7. Interview, *The Times of India*, New Delhi, September 27, 2005.
8. www.Rediff.com, op.cit.
9. Presentation in Ashoka Hotel, 19th September, 2005. It may be mentioned here that POK remained without a constitution for about 30 years and was governed by 'Business rules' laid down by the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs, Government of Pakistan in Islamabad.
10. Sayed, Firdous, *Genesis of Militancy in Kashmir*, Paper presented in a Seminar in CRRID, Chandigarh, September 19-20, 2005.
11. The provocation appears to be that in the war of succession to succeed Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah after his death, the Indian National Congress Party leadership, particularly Smt. Indira Gandhi, had put its weight to favour Dr. Farooq Abdullah against his brother-in-law and the senior NC leader Mr. G. M. Shah. That Dr. Farooq Abdullah joined hands with the opponents of Indian National Congress became the main source of tension and discord between NC leadership and the Congress party.