

Opinion

Lessons from Kashmir for South Asia

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Kashmir is sought to be projected as a flashpoint in South Asia. In the post-nuclear phase, Pakistan has intensified its efforts, backed by some major global powers, in internationalising the issue. Insurgency in Kashmir was organised on the pattern of Afghan resistance against Soviet forces. However, in view of an entirely different social and cultural milieu, the experiment floundered. The all-out efforts of creating and projecting an ‘enemy image’ on the style of ‘Soviet occupying forces’ to sustain the militancy in Kashmir failed to yield results. It needs to be recognised that the Kashmir ethos has much to do with this failure. Moreover, Kashmir has been a part of Indian socio-political-constitutional system for the last five decades. The aberration and distortions aside, the state has got integrated with varied structures and institutions at the national level. This relationship could not be snapped by merely raising some emotive slogans.

In the background of this relationship, even the responses of the government and the general public of to the turmoil in Kashmir have not been uniform. The Indian press and electronic media have been giving an objective and sympathetic reporting of the developments in Kashmir. Moreover, Indian NGOs and activists were the first to raise their voice and document of the human rights violations in Kashmir. Ironically, these very reports were later used by Pakistan as a diplomatic offensive against India on the human rights issue. Since Pakistan’s efforts in promoting ‘Jehad’ euphoria could not take off, the entire insurgency operations degenerated into a criminalised activity.

In absence of a strong local support to the insurgency the inflow and activities of foreign mercenaries are on the increase. Their presence and combats with the security forces are sustaining the impression that Kashmir is still undergoing a turmoil, although international opinion is now getting better informed about the developments in Kashmir. It appears that the strategists from across the border have employed the tactics with the objective that in the event of truce, the groups which are overtly or covertly supporting the insurgency, should form a part of the governance in the State. The scenario is not far from the realm of possibility in view of the ‘peace packages’ being offered and even implemented in different zones of conflict. In recent times the formula was tested in Tajikistan and it might ultimately happen in the case of Algeria also. It is the latest strategic technique on the part of the big powers. However, it has different implications for South Asian societies including Pakistan.

The South Asian societies are marked by their plural character in terms of languages, cultures, regions and religions. These states have emerged as sovereign entities after their prolonged struggles against colonialism. In the post-colonial era, nation building became an arduous task. It was all the more challenging for multi-cultural states to blend the diverse religious, linguistic and

ethno-cultural groups into a national mould. However, majority of these states devised the mechanism of a secular democratic order to achieve this objective. India provides a glaring illustration to the point in South Asia.

However, Pakistan having carved out its existence on the basis of religion from a plural sub-continental social order embarked on the task of nation building on the basis of Islam. In fact, Pakistan has been attempting to juxtapose an Islamic identity over a diverse cultural ethnic and linguistic social mosaic. The last fifty years experience of its existence reveals that Pakistan has failed in its initiatives in building a homogenous theocratic social order. Thus, under the veneer of an imposed Islamic identity, the ethno-cultural identities have been trying to assert themselves. These assertions are at loggerheads with the establishment resulting in violence and mayhem.

Pakistan could not prevent the assertion of Bengali identity and the subsequent cessation of East Pakistan in the name of Islam. Instead of seeking the opportunities for reconciling the claims of diverse ethno-cultural groups and recognising the diversities within. Pakistan establishment has been ruthlessly crushing these identities. It is an irony of history that challenge to the two-nation theory is emanating from within rather than from without.

In its scheme of things, Pakistan perceives that annexation of Kashmir will provide succour to its thesis and would weaken the argument of promoting social solidarity based on diversity and pluralism. This line of thinking has the potential of tearing apart the social cohesion of South Asian societies. The challenge of Kashmir, which is essentially related to its ethno-cultural assertion in a plural society and articulated in terms of autonomy, is good governance with emphasis on social justice and equitable distribution and access to resources. It is in fact a challenge in all South Asian states. Be it Jaffna or Karachi or Baluchistan, the issues remain the same. It is not for these states to contemplate above the larger implications of fishing in each other's troubled waters.

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