

DIALOGUE IN KASHMIR

The Government of India has recently appointed a Special Representative, a former senior Intelligence officer, to hold a dialogue with different "stake holders" in Jammu and Kashmir state. The involvement of young students and youth in frequent protests and violence appears to have prompted the Union Government to appoint the Special Representative to hold a dialogue with different sections of society and fathom out the reasons for this phenomenon. The Special Representative has started visiting the state and holding meetings with the people. According to press reports the Representative is not bound by any specific agenda and has been given complete freedom in this regard. However, it may be mentioned here that the term of reference pertaining to "stake holders" appears to be superfluous in the sense that it gives an impression of a special group or a distinct class with whom the representative should be holding a dialogue. It needs to be recognized that every citizen of the state is a " stake holder" because every one has been bearing the brunt of turmoil and uncertain conditions.

The initial response to the appointment of Special Representative, particularly from the political parties of the state, has been that the Union Government had earlier appointed a Committee which submitted its report but no action was taken on the recommendations of the Committee. It may be noted that much before this Committee was appointed, the National Conference party which came to power in 1996 had appointed a committee headed by its law minister, Piarey Lal Handoo, which submitted a report on 'Autonomy in Jammu and Kashmir State' which was then sent to the Union Government. The fact remains that these voluminous reports may be of academic value but they have remained oblivious to many an issue which are complicated and constitute a predicament in pragmatic terms. Moreover, the first report of National Conference government had

wider international and strategic implications. Hence it would be a distraction from addressing the present crisis by referring to these reports. Nonetheless, these reports should prod the Special Representative toward adopting an *approach* which should be focused and result oriented. It would go a long way, apart from providing a direction, in restoring the confidence of people in the system.

The three dimensions, which have larger implications, need to be given the priority to restore the confidence and provide the much needed confidence among the people. It may be emphasized that political rhetoric of different shades and hues, across the board, has pushed the existential issues to the background. This exercise of scoring points has become a convenient game which has shadowed the pain and anguish of average common people in the state.

The first dimension which needs to be addressed is the socio-political and psychological *disorientation* which has distorted the mindsets of the people in general and younger generation in particular in the state. This phenomenon is more specific to Kashmir. It appears that this ploy is either a well laid out design or is an outcome of ignorance and confusion. Ironically, the media-local as well as national, is perpetuating this process of disorientation. Distortion of historical facts, divisive interpretations of social events, selective application of religious percepts torn out of historical contexts, to the emerging situations and sharpening the anxieties are some of the techniques which are employed to sustain this distortion. A closer examination would reveal that this distortion has a well structured institutional background support which is the main source of this menace. However, it has enveloped the society to the extent of obscuring its capacities of rational contemplation and reasoning. This dimension though falls in the sphere of social psychology academically, but deserves attention in view of its strategic implications.

During the 2014 elections, Kashmir showed an impressive participation percentage of 65% which was 23% higher than usual

percentage of participation in other states of India. European Parliament (EU), on behalf of European Union welcomed the smooth conduct of elections in J&K. The EU took cognizance of the fact that a large number of Kashmiri voters turned out despite the calls for the boycott of elections by certain separatist forces.

It is intriguing to note that a few districts in Kashmir valley which have been prone to unrest and violence frequently has fairly a good record of participation in elections. For instance, Kulgam district had a 56.38%, Shopian 50.65% and Pulwama 38.18% of participation respectively. This data reflects the passion of people in democratic participation. However, the same very people participating in violence should not be seen as an enigma. Rather, this phenomenon needs to be objectively deciphered.

This brings us to the second dimension of *governance* in the state. It is, no doubt, a larger debate. However, certain issues which are related to it leading to disenchantment and estrangement of people from the system deserve serious consideration. Some issues relating to *governance* in the state may be mentioned briefly.

The first issue, which is frequently debated relates to *transparency*. There is a widespread belief that governmental actions particularly pertaining to developmental activities lack *transparency*. A huge bureaucratic structure, like other states of the country, has sprung up during the last more than seven decades; yet there are no satisfactory transparent mechanisms available in the state. The pronouncements of the Union government about the 'special financial packages' from time to time has added to the disenchantment at the public levels because there is no *transparency* about the expenditure of these packages. Moreover, there are no visible changes to be seen which these initiatives should have brought about. A genuine and impartial data base would restore the public confidence in this behalf.

The second and crucial issue relates to the *accountability*. It is an irony that the State High Court has to intervene frequently and direct the government to report about the status of measures which the government

is taking regarding the pollution in Dal Lake or construction of a bridge somewhere. That the citizens have to approach the highest court in the state regarding the matters which fall in the normal functioning of the government is a reflection of the state of affairs.

The third critical dimension relates to the *employment* opportunities for young qualified persons who are expecting jobs in the government sector. It may be conceded that it is not practicable to meet these expectations according to the desires of the persons looking for the jobs in the government sector. Be that as it may, the educational planners should have looked within the system and took the initiatives to prepare 'employable' young persons. The Jammu and Kashmir was the only state in the sub-continent which introduced the free education from primary up to university level in 1947. However, the times have changed and the socio-economic framework is changing too. Has the state responded to this challenge?

In conclusion, there can be no quick-fix solutions to the problems in the state. However, there is an urgency for an introspection and initiating the vigorous initiatives to restore the lost confidence of people. The first step in this direction is that the political groupings should accept it as a joint challenge and address it.

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