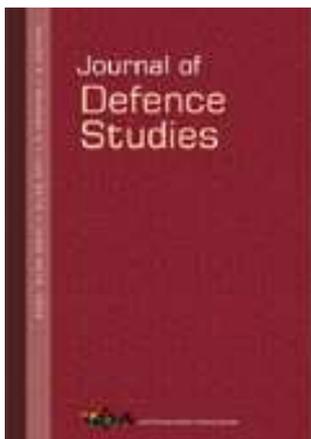


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The Current Kashmir Imbrolio Causes and the Way Ahead

*D.S. Hooda**

On 8 July 2016, a group of soldiers and policemen surrounded a house in Bumdoora village of south Kashmir. As search of the house started, one policeman was fired at and injured. By the time the encounter ended three terrorists had been killed; one of them was Burhan Wani, a Hizbul Mujahideen leader. Following the killing, Kashmir erupted in a wave of protests.

Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is no stranger to protests, with the last major one in 2010 claiming over 100 lives¹, but 2016 was significantly different. While the 2010 agitation was largely restricted to urban centres, the 2016 protests were much more widespread and started from the rural areas of south Kashmir. Within a week, they spread to north Kashmir as well. As stone-pelting mobs confronted the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and state police, Kashmir shut down. Tourists disappeared, markets and schools closed and Internet services were suspended. Over the next four months, about 80 civilians² were killed while thousands of protesters and policemen were injured. Some of the most harrowing images coming out of the Valley in the summer of 2016 were of young girls and boys blinded by pellet guns.

It is often asked as to why the security forces or the government did not foresee worsening of the situation? Should we have been better prepared? For those of us on ground in J&K, the outburst of anger was

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no surprise. However, it is also a fact that governments typically respond to a situation only when it snowballs into a crisis.

CAUSES OF THE CURRENT UNREST

To look for the causes of the current unrest, it is necessary to go back a few years. The year 2012 was perhaps the most peaceful one since insurgency broke out in the state in 1989. The total number of deaths of terrorists, civilians and security forces was 117³, down from a peak of over 4,500 in 2001.⁴ Kashmir had come out of three years of continuous protests from 2008 to 2010, and tourism was picking up with 1.4 million tourists visiting the Kashmir Valley in 2011–12.⁵ Then came a combination of factors, both external and internal, which led to a slow but steady deterioration in the security situation.

The growing normalcy in the state was disconcerting for the Pakistan Army. Also, 2013 was an election year in Pakistan and Nawaz Sharif, during the election campaign, was talking of 'warmer ties' with India. Both these developments, in my view, induced the Pakistan Army to step up terrorist activities in the state. Jammu region, which had seen an almost total disappearance of terrorism, was the first target. Thus, the year 2013 started with the beheading of an Indian soldier by terrorists and attacks on army patrols along the Line of Control (LoC) escalated sharply. Heavy exchanges of fire between the two armies became routine. Ceasefire violations jumped from 62 in 2011 to 347 in 2013.⁶ In September 2013, terrorists who had infiltrated from Pakistan attacked a police station in Hiranagar and an army unit in Samba. This was the first suicide attack in Jammu region after 2008. This trend of striking police and military garrisons would continue over the next few years with many high-visibility targets being struck, like the Pathankot airbase and the headquarters at Uri and Nagrota. Casualty figures among security forces jumped from 17 in 2012 to 61 in 2013.⁷ Most of these attacks were by terrorist outfits who had been sent from Pakistan for a single, specific task. This literally killed any chance of diplomacy between the governments of India and Pakistan.

There were also internal factors coming into play which would combine to create a troubled climate. State elections in 2014 threw up a hung assembly and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) came together to form the government. While this seemed the most logical course at that time, the ideological differences were too sharp to be smoothed over. It did not help that Mufti Mohammad

Sayeed, immediately after his swearing in as Chief Minister, gave credit to the Hurriyat, Pakistan and militant outfits for the successful conduct of assembly elections in the state. Moreover, Valley-based political parties had campaigned to keep the BJP from coming to power in J&K and it was a shock to many locals when PDP agreed to form the government with the BJP. The Agenda of Alliance was an excellent document which could have provided a basis for the two disparate parties to work together, but it has been totally ignored.

Another root cause was, and still is, youth alienation and angst in Kashmir, which can be attributed to a number of reasons. About 70 per cent of the population of the Valley is under the age of 35. This majority group has seen nothing but conflict through most of their lifetime. Male unemployment stands at 41 per cent, almost double the national average.⁸ There is also a sense of insecurity among the youth which inhibits them from moving outside the state to pick up jobs. For these reasons, local recruitment in terrorist ranks started picking up in 2014. Although the numbers were not high (between 60 and 70 in 2015⁹), it significantly affected the population sentiment. When operations were conducted against local terrorists holed up in villages, the people would come out in large numbers and attempt to create a situation which could help or allow the terrorist, who was a son or brother to someone in the village, to escape. This was the start to what is visible today in almost all operations.

Social media had also been feeding the dissatisfaction. It was not only being used to mobilise the crowds for protests but also to show the government and the security forces in very poor light through sophisticated campaigns run on popular sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Fears of the 'Kashmiri identity' being swamped by outsiders were played up, both in social media and by the separatists.

There had also been growing radicalisation among the people of J&K. It is often debated whether this radicalisation had a greater religious or political character, but what was clear was that there was greater acceptance in the society of violence as a tool. In fact, 2016 saw attacks on police stations and the burning of schools. More recent examples include the targeting of local policemen and security personnel on leave, the attack on Amarnath pilgrims, and the establishment of the al-Qaeda branch in Kashmir. What was also visible on the streets was the openly hostile attitude of the very young boys.

All this boiled over in July 2016. The separatists, who had been losing space in Kashmir, were quick to exploit the situation, but in the absence

of any strategy, could only give repeated calls for bandhs. Pakistan obviously took advantage of the unrest by stepping up infiltration. There were 364 infiltration bids from Pakistan into J&K in 2016, the highest in five years.¹⁰

The winter of 2016 brought some calm, but it was shattered during the Lok Sabha by-elections of April 2017. Amidst widespread violence, voting in the Srinagar seat saw a mere 7 per cent turnout.¹¹ It is common these days to hear functionaries quoting statistics of a drop in stone-pelting figures and a rise in terrorists killed as a sign of improving situation but the fact is that the root causes of the problem have not been addressed. The situation will continue to simmer.

WHAT SHOULD THE UNION GOVERNMENT DO?

In a search for solutions, the foremost is to recognise the true nature of the problem; in the absence of this correct answers cannot be found. To dismiss stone pelters as paid agents is to ignore the real sense of frustration and alienation among the youth. Similarly, to say that the problem is only restricted to a few districts does not answer why voter turnout for the Srinagar seat was so dismal and why we have been unable to conduct the election process for the Anantnag seat.

In my view, we should not be presently looking for any kind of permanent, long-term solutions. The first focus should be on bringing peace to the streets and addressing the reasons for the current unrest. This can only be done by the State and the Union governments. Therefore, any talk of involving Pakistan at this stage would serve no purpose.

Politically, the BJP and PDP need to mute their ideological differences. Contentious issues which vitiate the atmosphere should be put on the back-burner. The Agenda of Alliance was the basis on which the two parties came together and it must be taken forward. One key issue is the dignified return of Kashmiri Pandits to the Valley. A solution to this will heal much of the divide that has emerged between the regions of Kashmir and Jammu.

The government's strategic communications are extremely poor. Very little is being done to counter the narrative that the state is at war with its own people. Some utterances by senior officials have also not helped. This battle is clearly being lost. A specific plan, with adequate funding and staffing, has to be put in place. We must also be careful that such initiatives are not run only from Delhi. There are local issues where the narrative has to be locally crafted to be effective. Jammu requires a

different theme from Kashmir, and even within the valley, Anantnag and Uri have contrasting characteristics. Hence, perception campaigns must be run at various levels.

Youth engagement is the key to calming the situation. It is a must to reach out directly to the youth, including student leaders. A very large number of young people were injured in the firing of pellet guns. Stories of those who have lost their eyesight find frequent mention in the local newspapers and the narrative of state brutality is kept alive. The government must announce steps for rehabilitation and support to these children. This will have an immediate soothing effect.

Employment generation should be given an impetus. Udaan is an initiative by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to provide skills and job opportunities to the youth. Simultaneously, the aim is also to provide exposure to corporate India of the rich talent pool available in J&K. However, the scheme has not seen much success because the jobs are largely outside the state and the salaries are very modest. The government could modify the scheme by offering training and jobs within the state, for example, in travel and hospitality sectors. This would find more takers among the young men and women of the state.

There is a requirement for a comprehensive counter-radicalisation and deradicalisation programme. Currently there is no such initiative, except sporadic efforts by the police and other security forces. A large number of youth are arrested during protests and, in the absence of juvenile centres, put into jail with hardened criminals and terrorists. This is the surest route to radicalisation. Some recent announcements have been made about setting up juvenile homes in every district. This is a very welcome step and should be immediately implemented.

Another urgent need is for a practical and effective 'surrender and rehabilitation' policy. The army and the police have constantly made appeals for surrender of local youth by promising them all support, but verbal assurances are not enough. The success of any policy is not dependent on the financial incentives for surrender but the successful rehabilitation into the society. This is where the current policy is silent. With the increase in locals joining terrorist groups, it is absolutely essential to break this cycle. It will only happen if there is confidence in the post-surrender security of individuals and their effective rehabilitation.

Development is always helpful. Unfortunately, in J&K, it has acquired a political colour with a Jammu versus Kashmir competition. However, there are many non-controversial areas, such as tourism,

roads and education, which affect all three regions (Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh) of the state equally. These could be the focus areas for development. Attention is also required to be given to those regions which have become militancy-free. Many of the past hotbeds of terrorism in Rajouri, Reasi and Doda districts are now completely peaceful but have seen no improvements in infrastructure, compelling the locals to question the government's oft-repeated stance that development will automatically follow whenever there is peace.

Additionally, the transnational character of the problem must also be addressed. Border management in J&K needs a hard look. Currently, the International Boundary (IB) sector in Jammu region is manned by the Border Security Force (BSF) under the MHA, while the balance of the LoC with Pakistan is with the Indian Army under the Ministry of Defence (MoD). This arrangement was unsatisfactory to start with and has now been exacerbated by a number of high-profile incidents of infiltration across the IB sector, followed by attacks on police and military garrisons. Heavy exchanges of fire are routinely taking place, affecting thousands of civilians. The BSF is doing a very good job, but there needs to be a coordinated approach in dealing with infiltrators from the time they cross the border till their neutralisation. Currently, the BSF looks only at the border, while the task of tackling the infiltrators who have successfully evaded the BSF is often left to the army and the police. There are numerous examples of this—Pathankot, Samba, Janglote, Arnia and Nagrota.

Addressing this issue requires that the BSF in the IB sector should be placed under command of the army. There will, of course, be many issues both from the side of the army and the BSF, which will require resolution, but the overall effect on border management will be positive. There will also be a significant improvement in the counter-infiltration strategy as responsibility will be with one agency and one ministry.

The government must also have a consistent policy for dealing with Pakistan. It is quite obvious that Pakistan has no interest in seeing a peaceful Kashmir. It will continue to provide direct and indirect support to stir up trouble in J&K. The government has taken strong steps to choke funds to the separatists. This is an excellent start and needs to be followed up. Diplomacy with Pakistan has its limits. The United States will continue making threats to Pakistan, as they have done in the past, and some cuts in funding can be seen, but as long as the Americans remain in Afghanistan they will need Islamabad. Even if Pakistan does

take some steps against the Haqqani Network and the Taliban, it will not act against Kashmir-centric terror groups. China's growing strategic and economic cooperation with Pakistan has also enabled the latter to stave off international pressure over its terrorist links.

In this geopolitical scenario, Indian hopes of diplomatic isolation of Pakistan are unlikely to translate into a substantial reality. In the absence of any other pressure point—political, diplomatic or economic—the only viable strategy to deter Pakistan lies in the military domain. Pressure must be put on the Pakistan Army along the LoC. Our responses must be unpredictable, while remaining below the threshold of an all-out war. Pakistan has a confident and well-trained army and quick results should not be expected; but in a sustained campaign, India's military superiority will prevail.

SUMMING UP

The current troubled situation in J&K is a result of youth alienation, political issues and a sense of neglect. The Pakistan Army has also significantly stepped up its efforts to destabilise J&K. In these circumstances, the overall strategy has to be two-pronged: acting tough with Pakistan; and winning back the confidence of the population. This battle will be won not only by the number of terrorists killed, but when the youth find more solace in the fruits of peace rather than pride in confronting security forces with stones in their hands. This is certainly a challenge but not impossible to achieve, if politics takes a back seat and there is a genuine attempt at conflict resolution.

NOTES

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3. See 'Fatalities in Terrorist Violence 1988 – 2018', *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, available at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/data_sheets/annual_casualties.htm, accessed on 16 March 2018.

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7. 'Fatalities in Terrorist Violence 1988 – 2018', n. 3.
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