

From Rhetoric to Reality – Delhi must treat Kashmir as political problem

Sujaat Bukhari, May 25, 2018

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's day-long visit to Jammu and Kashmir on May 20 was little different from his past forays to the state, though he again missed the point by not addressing the issue politically. Still, he departed from his own stated position that only reflected a hardline and was concurred with what the state machinery had been doing on the ground to deal with the highly charged situation. From Army to Jammu and Kashmir Police, there has been no looking back as far as the bullet-to-bullet and bullet-to-stone policy is concerned.

Somehow New Delhi changed its track ahead of Ramadhan and announced a conditional ceasefire that would put to halt the operations against the militants while the rest of "retaliatory" actions would continue. The impression that Modi wanted to play politics by not publicly endorsing the "ceasefire" announced by Home Minister Rajnath Singh was also dispelled since he owned it and even mentioned that the government earlier had given amnesty to thousands of stone throwing youth. Modi's and Rajnath's policy vis-a-vis Kashmir has been at crossroads since 2016 uprising post-Burhan Wani's killing. Rajnath chose to remain silent after his efforts for a political outreach were sabotaged by a section in the power corridors of Delhi which enjoyed patronage of Modi himself. So it was given to understand that the "ceasefire" call would be left to Rajnath, as the Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had rejected the call for ceasefire from Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti only three days before it was announced. However, Modi not only put to rest those speculations but also appealed the youth to return to "mainstream", a term he hurriedly explained meant their homes and mothers. This was in contrast to his known approach towards Kashmir and its volatile situation. A year ago, he had offered a stark choice to Kashmiris. "I want to tell the youth of Kashmir that they have two ways ahead...On one hand, you have tourism and on other hand you have terrorism," he declared at a function to inaugurate a tunnel along the Srinagar-Jammu highway on April 3, 2017.

But this time he offered them development and asked them to come back to their homes. Has Modi softened his stand to this extent? This needs to be seen in the backdrop of many developments that are taking place regionally and internationally. At the same time Prime Minister Modi did not come out of the mindset Delhi has been plagued with – that is to look at Jammu and Kashmir through the prism of development, security and strategic needs. He again invoked former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's line to follow "Kashmiriyat", may be ninth time since 2014, though he omitted "Jamhooriyat and Insaniyat" this time. Modi has failed to walk the talk on this account. He said the only solution to Kashmir's problem is "development, development and development". He is wrong given the history of the conflict and the resistance the people have shown since 1990 and before, besides the development that has taken place. If development alone were the answer, then Modi himself announced a mega package of Rs 80,000 crore on November 7, 2015. Though it is a matter of debate how much had come as its major portion

was for central projects envisaged during Rajiv Gandhi's time; still these sops have not diluted the political content of the resistance on the ground. One is reminded of the destruction that had taken place during the peak of militancy from 1990 to 1996. When Farooq Abdullah came to power in 1996 he took up the herculean task of rebuilding thousands of schools, hospitals, bridges and other infrastructure. He also gave jobs to roughly 1.5 lakh people. But he could not change the politics of the conflict and even lost the election in 2002. Others too followed the development mantra but failed. If this was the real answer to groundswell for "azadi" then Modi's Rs 80, 000 package and many jobs that were created after 2015, Kashmir would not have witnessed 2016 uprising that was marked with anti-India sentiment. Notwithstanding the fact that thousands of youth line for recruitment centres of the same Army that they chase in towns and villages with stones, the storyline of Kashmiri being at far distance from Delhi is not blurred. Modi talking about development alone is against the past and present of Jammu and Kashmir, and for future too it does not hold any promise unless the political nature is accepted.

The incident of May 21 in a village in Shopian where Army had organized an Iftaar for the people is a grim reminder of the fact how Kashmiris don't see it as their "own Army". They resisted the Iftaar and protested which led to Army opening fire and injuring many. This battle for winning hearts and minds has already failed. The interlocutor Dinesh Sharma, who was also mentioned by Modi in his speech, has also not made any difference for want of his mandate and role. Meeting people to address the issues of breakdown of electric transformers and roads was not something he was supposed to do. Since he lacked mandate to talk about political issue, his relevance has already been hit, pushing him to oblivion. However, certain developments need to be connected to "not so harsh" tone Modi had while he was in Kashmir. First that Delhi has been facing tough time in defending the civilian deaths during encounters, and "Operation All Out" has turned out to be counter-productive in many ways though a large number of militants have been killed. Hence the ceasefire – to give a break and bring situation to a level wherefrom it could be taken to a different level.

Another development that can be linked to the changed tenor was the peace overtures with Pakistan. They first came with reconciliatory messages from both the Army Chiefs and the latest was Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman indicating on May 21 that "any comment on wanting peace will definitely be taken seriously" when told about Pakistan Army's recent indication of supporting a peaceful resolution. Re-opening of Track-II after Neemrana Dialogue resumed last month and other measures through back channel suggest that Delhi is willing to do "business" despite heightened tension along International Border that claimed many lives in past one week. Since Modi is facing pressure on domestic front on many counts ahead of 2019 elections, he is preparing the ground to see that SAARC Summit takes place and instead of rhetoric, he might prefer "peace" to be sold to the electorate. Relations with Nepal and Maldives are also indicating towards this thread. In order to get Pakistan on board for a successful SAARC, it is imperative to cool down tempers in and on Kashmir. In this backdrop next few months will be interesting to watch.