

The Second Uprising

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Signs of simmering discontent have been visible in Kashmir since early 2007 after a series of civilian killings in fake encounters by security forces and in the Amarnath land row agitation of 2008. Contrary to what New Delhi may have been led to believe, separatist politics has acquired a more intense and aggressive form in the Valley by the participation of youth. Exploring the manner in which assertions of separatist politics have changed since 1989-90, this article argues that separatism is now driven by street responses of the youth and is witnessing a shrinking space for moderation.

“Second uprising” is the term I use to describe the recent phase of unrest in Kashmir which has witnessed more than 60 people being killed in police action in the last three months. The word “second” has reference to the “first uprising” in Kashmir during 1989-90, which coincided with the onset of armed militancy. This was a period of massive popular upsurge leading not only to the breakdown of law and order, but also to the collapse of political authority of the state. The *azadi* sentiment had swayed almost every section of the Kashmiri society at that time.

Early 2007: Emerging Discontent

Like in the 1990s, the last three months have also witnessed a tremendous upsurge in Kashmir, making it difficult for the government to even manage law and order. Rather than bring about order, the coercive authority that the State had at its disposal contributed to public anger and defiance, resulting in the daily toll of the killed and injured.¹ People refused to comply with the writ of the State – openly defying curfew and coming out in large numbers to protest. The only order that they have been willing to follow has been the one provided by the weekly protest calendars issued by the separatists. It is according to this calendar that people observe a total hartal, partial half-day hartal, protest march, etc. People also rely on these calendars for their daily activities such as buying essential goods or attending offices and educational institutions. There has been an intense display of pro-azadi sentiment on the street. The new slogan “Go India Go” reflects the strong anti-India emotions that are being asserted with a new vigour.

Though the current eruption reflects the anger of the people, particularly of the youth, against the unending cycle of violence, the signs of simmering discontent have been visible for quite some time – at least since early 2007 when the whole Valley erupted over the killing of five innocent civilians in

a fake encounter by the security forces. The year ended with protest demonstrations in two separate incidents of killings – one in Magam in Budgam district and the other in Kukroosa in Kupwara district. The simmering discontent came out in the open in the massive agitation around the Amarnath land row during the summer of 2008. The agitation had seen an intense reassertion of the *azadi* sentiment in the mammoth processions which invoked the memory of the popular response in 1990. Immediately after the agitation, people did participate in large numbers in the assembly elections. However, the protest demonstrations continued after the elections. The case of rape and murder of two women in Shopian became the major issue of 2009 resulting in strong protests throughout the year. The beginning of the current year was marked by protests in three different cases of killing of innocent youth by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the Border Security Force (BSF). Later on, the issue of killing of three innocent civilians in a fake encounter in Machail in Kupwara district had led to protests all over the Valley. It was during the protest against the Machail fake encounter, that the killing of 17-year-old Tufail Mattoo took place which triggered the present phase of protest and violence.

Misguided Notions of ‘Normalcy’

The reasons for unrest in Kashmir can be located in three related factors. First, despite a decline in militancy, there has not been much change in the ground realities. The much talked about confidence-building measures have not materialised. One often hears about the release of political prisoners and undertrials not charged with serious crimes, yet no policy decision has been taken in this context. What is worse, there is continued violation of human rights by the police and the armed forces. The prime minister’s call for “zero tolerance to human rights violations” has not been effective in restraining the number of civilian killings. With every such killing, the separatists as well as the mainstream parties raise the demand to repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and to reduce the presence of the military in the civilian areas.

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Second, the peace process that had raised the expectations of the people during Atal Behari Vajpayee's government has been stalled. The dialogue initiated by Vajpayee with the Hurriyat Conference was reluctantly continued by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, but after two rounds of ineffective talks, it was substituted by the Round Table Conferences convened by the prime minister. These did not have much space for separatists and were attended by political actors mostly belonging to the mainstream political space. The non-engagement with the separatists has generated a feeling that the UPA government is not ready to approach the problems in a political manner and all its initiatives in Kashmir have been limited to offering economic packages and development policies. The direct consequence of the lack of political engagement with Kashmir has been reflected in the growing disillusionment and cynicism in the Valley. Third, a feeling of isolation has been generated by the changed international realities of the post-9/11 world in general, and Pakistan's internal troubles in particular. With no international pressure on India to resolve the Kashmir issue, there is a fear in the minds of the Kashmiris that the issue might be put on the backburner and the momentum created by the militancy might be dissipated. Assertion of separatist sentiments in an intense manner is a response to this fear.

The complacency of New Delhi vis-à-vis Kashmir has been mainly due to the apparent "normalcy in Kashmir". Besides the decline of militancy, it is the extended space for mainstream politics which had given the impression that everything was in order. The near normal politics of governance in the post-2002 period – with an intense competition between the National Conference and People's Democratic Party (PDP) – has been misconstrued as the decline of separatist space. The massive participation of people in the 2008 elections, in defiance of the boycott call by the separatist organisations, was seen as final confirmation of the waning of the separatist sphere of influence. Reality, however, has been quite different. The extension of mainstream politics has not taken place at the cost of separatist sentiments. It is a fact that there had been a crisis within separatist politics

due to internal divisions, lack of visionary leadership and erosion of credibility of most leaders. However, this crisis has not in any way contracted the separatist space. The anti-India feeling, which feeds most of this separatist space, has actually intensified during the last few years – mostly due to the impression that India is not serious in resolving the conflict but also due to the feeling of lack of justice. This feeling emanates from the unaddressed questions of unaccounted disappearances, extrajudicial killings and scores of other similar grievances. A number of civilian killings during the last few years have added to this feeling.

Separatist politics therefore has a substantial base; and rather than waning, it has acquired a more intense and aggressive form. However, its manifestation during the last few years indicates a transformation of its character – a reflection of the changes in the political settings, the most important being the decline of militancy.

Youth and Assertion of Separatist Politics

Separatism as it had asserted itself in the post-1989 period was essentially manifested through militant activities. After its initial assertion through large-scale protest demonstrations on the streets of Srinagar, popular separatist sentiments were implicitly reflected through the widespread approval and support to the militants. Even after it lost legitimacy in the later years of the 1990s, militancy continued to define the dominant response in Kashmir. During the last few years, however, militancy has so declined that it does not in any way have an impact on the political responses. It is, therefore, a post-militancy phase in which separatism is expressed, affirmed and sustained through the popular response.

With its representation through the popular response, the indigenous nature of the separatist movement has been reclaimed. The dependence of armed militancy on external support, especially of Pakistan, had given it an external dimension. This external dimension was later on intensified with the entry of jihadi elements who sought to make Kashmir a part of the global jihadi movement. The present phase of separatist politics, however, has shed the

burden of being led or influenced by external factors. It is a purely indigenous mobilisation and is driven by its own momentum. It can neither be termed as a "proxy war", nor a pan-Islamic movement.

It is on the streets of Kashmir that separatist politics is asserted. Protest politics is the major tool of the present phase of separatism. The frequent "*chalo*" calls given by the separatists (call to march to different spots in the Valley) become meaningful in this context. By exhorting people to come on to the streets in large numbers and display their azadi sentiments, the separatist organisations and leaders not only seek to assert their relevance and demonstrate to the Indian state the popular support for the separatist politics, but also to reinforce and regenerate the separatist sentiments in the society. That the politics of street demonstrations succeeded in this latter task of rejuvenating the separatist sentiments in Kashmir can be witnessed in the transition of Kashmir's separatist politics in the post-2008 period. The massive protests during the two phases of the Amarnath land row not only succeeded in initiating young boys into separatist politics, but also in bringing about a smooth generational shift. With Generation Next identifying with it and getting deeply involved, a fresh lease of life has been given to separatism.

The youth have found their own means of asserting their separatist sentiments – not merely through stone pelting, but also active use of the cyberspace, especially the social networking site, Facebook. The fervent passion with which these two means were used during the last three months of unrest reflects the intensity of involvement of two different sections of society in separatist politics. While the youth on the street are mostly from the lower middle classes, many of them school and college dropouts with no clear economic future before them, the youth in cyberspace belong to the middle class, many of them highly educated and professionals.

The participation of youth has given separatist politics a more aggressive and radical form. There is a renewed assertion of the goals of "self-determination" and "azadi" which is matched by a strong condemnation of "flexibility" shown and "compromises" made by the separatist

leadership during the peace process. This assertion, while echoing the frustration of society with the peace process, also reflects disillusionment with the separatist leadership. Since the multi-direction split of the All Party Hurriyat Conference, separatist politics has been fragmented and the leadership has lost its capacity to provide dynamic leadership to the people. It is not only the lack of unity of purpose and direction within the separatist camp which defines the crisis of leadership, but also its lack of credibility. Apart from their comfortable lifestyles, it is their petty differences and their lack of autonomy which has made society sceptical about the leaders. No separatist leader, other than Syed Ali Shah Geelani, enjoys the trust of the people – this notwithstanding the fact that Geelani's Islamic ideology does not represent the mass response. The biggest reason for his popularity is his consistency and non-negotiability. His hard-line approach matches the disenchantment at the ground level.

The rise in the popularity graph of Geelani itself speaks for the changed nature of separatist politics in Kashmir. As an Islamist seeking the merger of Kashmir with Pakistan, Geelani represents one of the influential voices in Kashmir, but he does not necessarily capture the central space of separatist politics. (The central space was represented by the moderate faction of the Hurriyat Conference along with other separatist leaders like Yasin Malik, Sajjad Lone and Shabir Shah.) In the present phase, however, the only leaders who are found to be relevant are those akin to Geelani. The rise of Masarat Alam as the "young leader" of Kashmir's present unrest reflects this very well. Chairman of the Muslim League and general secretary of Geelani's faction of the Hurriyat with a reputation of being an "extreme hardliner" (Jaleel 2010), Masarat Alam is a popular name in Kashmir now.

Moderation Akin to 'Compromise'

It is very evident that the space for moderation is shrinking. The moderate leadership, seeking relevance for itself, is also taking hard positions. Meanwhile, the very concept of "hard line" is undergoing such a transformation that even the well-known hardliners are finding it difficult to match

popular expectations. During the ongoing unrest in Kashmir, the Hizb Commander and the chairman of the United Jihad Council had to face flak from the youth. His effigies were burnt in the streets of Kashmir when he advised the youth to go slow and give breaks in their prolonged calls for hartals (*Daily Excelsior* 2010). He was warned that "those who will try to sabotage the ongoing agitation won't be spared. This is tantamount to making a sell-out of the martyrs" (*Daily Excelsior* 2010). To stop the anger against him, Salahuddin was forced to say that he was misquoted. Even Syed Ali Shah Geelani's appeal for non-violent protests, after he was released from the prison, was seen by many as a "compromise".

The leadership, as one can see, is under tremendous pressure from below. Separatism as it is being manifested now is driven by street responses. Rather than an organised movement from above, separatist politics at present is a reflection of a spontaneous response from below. The role that is left for the leadership is to act on behest of the protesting mob. Largely, it is the sentiment of the street which gets reflected in the programmes of the leadership. The leaders, in a way, are following those whom they are expected to lead. One could see this during the 2008 agitation when there was a spontaneous outburst of people, taking even the separatist leadership by surprise. Complementing the mood of the people on the street, the leaders thereafter, particularly Geelani, started giving direction to the protests through his various "chalo" calls and through his weekly calendars. During the present phase of upsurge as well, it is the youth response which has triggered the protests. Geelani, and in his absence Masarat Alam, have been giving it some order through the calendars issued at regular intervals. Since these calendars basically conform to the expectations of the youth, the autonomy of the leaders in issuing these remains a debatable question.

It is the logic of extremes that is defining separatist politics at the present moment. This logic is also resulting in singularities and one-dimensional political responses. For a movement that is dynamic in nature and is internally interactive, singularity may not be accepted for long. However,

for the time being, there is widespread endorsement of this kind of a response, especially in the context of the incapacity of the state government to end the cycle of violence and the inability of the central government to come up with a suitable political response.

Postscript

The expectation that some political measures would be initiated (starting with the amendment or partial withdrawal of the AFSPA from a few districts in the state of Jammu and Kashmir) to send a positive message to the Kashmiris has come to a naught due to the absence of a consensus within the government. After various meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), the central government called for an all-party meeting (15 September 2010), which could not evolve any consensus. After five hours of deliberations, the only decision taken was to send an all-party delegation to Kashmir. The visit, facilitated by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the government of J&K, was mandated to meet all sections of the people and gather different shades of opinion.

Meanwhile, protests continue unabated in almost all parts of the Valley – deepening the separatist sentiments with each passing day and radicalising them in the process. Already, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, who is the key actor at this point of time, has rejected the initiative stating the futility of any dialogue until "India accepts Kashmir as an international dispute" (Ali 2010). This is one of the conditions that Geelani has laid down for any dialogue with the Government of India. His other conditions are (i) India should begin the process of complete demilitarisation, which will be monitored by a credible international agency like the United Nations, (ii) the prime minister must commit publicly and ensure practically that henceforth no killing and arrests take place, (iii) India should discipline its troops and order them to stop humiliating people and destroying public and private property, (iv) release children and political prisoners immediately and unconditionally, and (v) punish the perpetrators of state violence, beginning with the conviction of troops responsible for the recent killings, and followed by the

conviction of all those responsible for war crimes in J&K (Nabi 2010).

NOTE

- ¹ The total number of those killed during protests since 11 June has exceeded 100. According to a report by *Greater Kashmir*, 108 persons were killed between 11 June 2010 and 19 September 2010 (Bhat, Aaqbool and Gul 2010). This number includes killings during protest demonstrations against the alleged desecration of the Quran in

the United States of America. While 17 people were killed on 14 September in Kashmir, three people were killed in Mendhar in the Jammu region on 15 September 2010. Most of those killed in Kashmir are youth under the age of 25.

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