

COMMENT

## Now Pepper Bullet

AFTER ALL 'KASHMIR' IS NOT A tea party. Whether the 3-member panel floated by the Centre can resolve the Kashmir tangle, a legacy left by history, is open to question. But the recent phase of popular outburst by ordinary masses seems to have made the policy-makers in New Delhi wise. They decided at the all party meet that lethal weapons won't be used and instead security forces would be advised to use pepper gun. It's not lethal as it doesn't kill but produces psychological impact similar to real bullets. Had this decision taken in time it would have saved several lives and would not have pushed the valley on brink of such serious crisis.

For most Pakistanis Kashmir belongs to Pakistan. And for most Indians Kashmir is an integral part of India but there are democrats and liberals who refuse to subscribe to this view. And the ground reality tells a different story. Except for a small section of religious fanatics the majority of Kashmiris would like to distance themselves from Pakistan. The recent UK think tank survey established that not more than 4 percent Kashmiris want to opt for Pakistan. Whether the Hurriyat can sustain such a prolonged agitation with the support of only 4 percent of the population again poses a big question mark. The separatists exploit anger and frustration of the youth. The Centre has been obliging a tiny section of Kashmiri society, with enormous privileges hoping all the time, even in adverse situation that they would be able to keep on doing what the ruling elites do to people everywhere. The problem with the Delhiwallas is that objective reality is not determined by what their yesmen think. Their message is just part of objective reality.

When prime minister Man-mohan Singh visited the valley in August 2006 for a round table conference with Kashmiri leaders he made a statement in no uncertain terms that there would be zero tolerance for violation of human rights. Then fake encounters and mysterious deaths after rape didn't stop. The same tradition continues unabated.

Before Mr Singh during late eighties and nineties the then prime minister Narasimha Rao promised genuine autonomy to Kashmir. His 'sky is the limit' euphoria vanished in no time. When BJP came to power it tried to remove article 370 from the constitution itself instead of giving even a small element of autonomy to the people of Kashmir.

Not that all militants were pro-Pakistani initially. Salahuddein, a school teacher and now head of Hizbul Mujahidin, based in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, was declared defeated in 1988 elections which were massively rigged, though most Kashmiris believed he actually won.

Even in the 21st century nationality question matters. Third World countries apart, advanced economies too are afflicted by it. The question of Basque nationality in Spain is a serious one and only the other day the Basque nationalists organised a massive demonstration of 2.5 million to press for their demand.

The policy of New Delhi is somehow to buy time and the panel can at best do that. Then the threat of bullet remains though it is pepper bullet this time.

Meanwhile Uncle Sam has declined to oblige Islamabad by accepting its offer to serve as a referee in the Kashmir dispute. Maybe, it is a disappointment for Pakistan, otherwise a trusted lackey of America since its inception. For good or worse Pakistani generals who in reality decide Pakistan's destiny, no matter whether there lies a civilian government or not, look too impatient to get the coveted real estate—Kashmir—which they think, historically belongs to them. □□□