

PIECING TOGETHER KASHMIR'S AUDACIOUS ROAD MAP

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to The Preamble, Union & its Territories and The Citizenship

In 1948, [the tallest leader of Jammu and Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah, greeted Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru](#) at Lal Chowk, Srinagar, with a couplet from the Sufi poet, Amir Khusro: "*Mun tu shudam tu mun shudi, mun tun shudam tu jaan shudi; Taakas na guyad baad azeen, mun deegaram tu deegari* (I have become you, and you me, I am the body, you soul; So that no one can say hereafter, that you are someone, and me someone else)". Five years later, Abdullah was dismissed from office and interned on the instructions of Nehru. Since then the body of Kashmir and the soul of the rest of the country have cohabited restlessly.

[On Monday, August 5, 2019, the Narendra Modi government made arguably the most audacious decision](#) of its tenure and probably the boldest decision made by any government on Kashmir since Indira Gandhi arrived at a *modus vivendi* with Sheikh Abdullah in 1975. By moving to revoke the 'special status' granted to the State under Article 370, and by reorganising the State into two Union Territories — Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh — it demonstrated unprecedented chutzpah, but it may have unleashed a chain of events difficult to predict or contain. For one, while even the founding fathers recognised that Article 370 was a transitional or temporary provision, there was a clear subtext; that its revocation would only happen once the acquiescence of the people of the State was obtained.

A fatal legal error, says P. Chidambaram

There is no doubt that the move will be legally challenged on grounds of procedural infirmities and, more substantively, that it undermines the basic feature of the compact between Delhi and Srinagar that was agreed upon in 1947. But beyond the legality, the real test will be on the streets of Srinagar, Jammu and Delhi once the security cordon is lifted from the State. What was unbecoming is the unwillingness to enter into consultation with the mainstream political leaders; in no other State would former Chief Ministers have been dealt with so cavalierly. Similarly, the impression that the move on Article 35A is designed to engineer demographic change rather than to protect the rights of women and other marginal groups of the State, will need to be corrected.

The move is clearly embedded in the larger geopolitics of the region and the manner in which regional alliances are marginalising Indian interests in the heartland of the region. With the United States seeking a quick exit from, and willing to let the Inter-Services Intelligence-sponsored Taliban to control Afghanistan (and China deeply embedded in the power play), the heartland of central Asia has rarely been as adverse to Indian interests since 1989, when the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan. Kashmir could, in these circumstances, become even more vulnerable to external elements than it was in the 1990s.

J&K loses its special status, divided into two UTs

On top of it, [the new camaraderie between U.S. President Donald Trump](#) and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and the repeated 'offer' by Mr. Trump to meditate in Kashmir may have precipitated the decision, which would, however, have in any case taken months of preparation. A decision to cancel the Amarnath yatra and take hard decisions, with both domestic and international ramifications, suggests that the government believed that a settlement in Jammu

and Kashmir and its 'pacification' was vital for India's national security. This was, of course, a marked departure from recent history.

Internally, for nearly 70 years, New Delhi managed Jammu and Kashmir (or more precisely the Kashmir Valley) through Srinagar's Gupkar Road. Gupkar Road became a metaphor for the Centre's approach, historically, towards Kashmir. New Delhi's follies and its firmness; its cleverness and its calculations; its vacillating largesse and its ubiquitous Leviathan-like presence, were part of Gupkar's landscape and legacy. Gupkar Road is the meandering gateway to the vistas of the Dal Lake, which runs from the desolate offices of the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan at Sonwar to the fading charms of erstwhile royal palaces on the banks of the lake. It is here that security agencies are nested in close comfort with the political and business elite, and where interrogation centres have morphed into "haunted" guest houses.

J&K Article 370 | Congress MPs tear resolution copy

As a model, Gupkar Road reflected itself in a series of policies that had become predictable; a network of patronage and power that had been gamed by friends and adversaries alike. It sustained a politics of entitlement; be it politicians or newspaper editors or bureaucrats who were kept in good humour on the basis of some chimera-like national interest. The Gupkar model, it was obvious, had become redundant and counter-productive and had incentivised bad politics and the attendant rent seeking and other despicable forms of corruption.

Now, shorn of its ideological fervour, what is seemingly being put in place is a new audacious plan beyond the constitutional interventions. As a start, the Modi plan is fundamentally about directly reaching out to the people without the mediation of either separatist groups or mainstream politicians.

Reaching out to the people is seen as being best done by empowering local democracy to its fullest. In the past, the devolution of powers to the panchayats and urban local bodies carried little popular appeal with elected members of the Legislative Assembly, who saw this as directly eroding their authority and had a vested interest in centralising power. One of the key factors, it may be recalled, behind the Centre's disconnection with the Mehbooba Mufti government was its continued unwillingness to hold elections to local bodies.

J&K Article 370 | Darjeeling parties seek Union Territory status

Since the imposition of Governor's (and now President's) Rule, the State Administrative Council has acted with remarkable alacrity to devolve powers to panchayati raj institutions in the State. Implementation of important schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, the Mid-Day Meal scheme, Integrated Child Development Services and social forestry projects has been devolved to the panchayats.

The monitoring and supervision of schools and health institutions has also been passed on to the panchayati raj institutions. In addition, panchayats shall also be conducting a quarterly social audit of works and programmes in their area.

Almost in parallel is the Savonarola-like campaign against corruption where no one — powerful or influential — is 'untouchable' or beyond the scope of investigation by law enforcement agencies, but directed at the power elite of the State.

Corruption is thus being addressed not just at the fringes; but the very core of a rotten system is now being targeted where a few families are seen to have usurped power and economic

benefits — not just in Kashmir but in Jammu as well. Indeed, almost every popular survey in Jammu and Kashmir reveals that one of the leading causes of youth angst and alienation was nepotism and corruption among the ruling elite.

This anti-corruption drive is accompanied by attempts to fast track development to create institutions of academic and extra-curricular excellence and to generate skilled employment in a manner that the youth are gainfully employed and weaned away from radical thought. This, of course, is easier said than done.

J&K Article 370 | Always on the cards, but Donald Trump supplied a quick trigger

In the interim, the new doctrine will have to persuade the majority of the people of Jammu and Kashmir that greater integration with India will provide them with more opportunities, provide more freedom and space, and strengthen their rights much more than the alternatives proposed by other mainstream parties or separatists.

Will the Modi plan lead to greater harmony between New Delhi and Srinagar, bringing enduring peace to the body and the soul? If it does, it will have performed an extraordinary national service and resolved one of New Delhi's greatest challenges. For the moment, however, we have to live with the uncertainty that is germane to all high-risk, almost adventurous undertakings.

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