

Solving the autonomy puzzle

Have you noticed how sometimes politicians prefer to quarrel with what their opponents have said — even if in the process they misunderstand and misrepresent — rather than comprehend an important point made by an adversary? The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) response to former Union Minister and [Congress leader P. Chidambaram's recent comment](#) on Kashmiri demands is a striking example.

Both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley have claimed [Mr. Chidambaram was advocating azaadi](#) and criticised him for it. But he wasn't. In fact, he said something subtly but significantly different. When Kashmiris call for azaadi, he claimed, they in fact mean autonomy. Perhaps the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister missed the point?

In the first instance, Mr. Chidambaram was reading down the cry for azaadi. He was suggesting the word is a rhetorical flourish to attract attention. For most — if not the majority of — Kashmiris, it's a way of asking for autonomy. He was, therefore, indicating an escape route from the present impasse between the Kashmiri people, who demand azaadi, and a government determined not to concede it.

At a deeper level, Mr. Chidambaram was also alluding to the fact that the autonomy Kashmiris want is something they actually had in the early years after accession and which successive governments in Delhi whittled down. This is what he meant when he said, "The demand in the Kashmir Valley is to respect, in letter and spirit, Article 370." Sadly, last week he didn't make this point fully clear.

However, last year he did. In an interview to me in July 2016 on *India Today TV*, he said: "We have ignored the grand bargain under which Kashmir acceded to India. I think we broke faith, we broke promises." This was an explicit reference to the fact that in 1947, Jammu and Kashmir acceded only in terms of defence, foreign affairs and currency/communications and, unlike other States, never merged. It wanted to retain its identity within the Indian sovereignty it accepted, but over the decades that's been eroded as the jurisdiction of myriad institutions was enlarged to encompass the State.

Though last week Mr. Chidambaram did not speak about a solution, in the July interview he spelt one out: "What is necessary is to give the assurance that the grand bargain under which Kashmir acceded to India will be fully honoured." This meant: "Let them frame their own laws as long as it does not conflict with the Constitution. As much as possible we have to assure them that we will respect their identity, history, culture, religion...and [still] allow them to be part of India."

Mr. Chidambaram did not say how this should be taken forward. However, Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary Sitaram Yechury, in a separate interview to me in September last year, outlined one possibility. He said we need to sit with Kashmiris and revisit developments since 1947 with a willingness to roll back some. In essence, this is also the position of the National Conference. Its leaders aren't clear about what needs to be rolled back, though some want a reversal of the nomenclature changed in the 1960s and how the 'head of state' is chosen. More importantly, many are confident that institutions like the Supreme Court, the Election Commission and the Comptroller and Auditor General, which are respected in Kashmir, will be retained. The key is to let Kashmiris decide for themselves.

The core of the Chidambaram-Yechury proposal is the belief there are many ways of being Indian. If 12 States, including Himachal, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Maharashtra and in the Northeast, can have special constitutional provisions, why not Jammu & Kashmir? This can only add to the rich

texture of being Indian, not strain the national fabric. Indeed, this was the foundation on which the much admired Manmohan Singh-Pervez Musharraf back-channel agreements were built.

Now, this is not azaadi. Far from it. But it is a very different concept of India to that of the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. No doubt this is why the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister chose to attack rather than understand and explore it. But, then, what did Mr. Modi mean when he said the solution was to “embrace” Kashmiris? Surely, in practical terms, that means meeting them half-way. Or is he like Humpty Dumpty who famously said, “When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less”?

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