

Unsettling the status quo in Jammu and Kashmir

“Or call it winter, which being full of care, Makes summer’s welcome, thrice more wished, more rare.” — William Shakespeare

Whatever the motivation, the [appointment of the former Director of the Intelligence Bureau \(DIB\) Dineshwar Sharma](#) as the interlocutor for Kashmir is to be welcomed. Better late than never.

Predictably, the beleaguered Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Mehbooba Mufti, was the [first to welcome the appointment](#) which enabled her to claim that the Bharatiya Janata Party had fulfilled its promise of dialogue. She, however, subsequently clarified that it was the secular DNA of India that had encouraged her Peoples Democratic Party to align with its ideological opposite, the BJP, in the State. National Conference president Farooq Abdullah perhaps expressed the Kashmiri sentiment more aptly when he said that we also need to talk to Pakistan. The reservations of the wise men of the Hurriyat notwithstanding, there has been palpable excitement in Srinagar that peace may at last have a chance. At the very least, the appointment provides hope. Separatists have been egging the Hurriyat high command to respond positively and even the most hardline of the separatists, S.A.S. Geelani, [acknowledges that dialogue is the only way forward](#). The more moderate Mirwaiz has pleaded for dialogue umpteen times.

Heavy-handedness is not the answer in Kashmir; it never has been and is not likely to be in the future. It only furthers the cause of separation. Kashmir is not a military or law and order problem; it is a political and emotive issue.

The security forces have a difficult job in J&K and have been doing this admirably of late, but rubbing that in or stating the obvious where it touches a raw nerve makes no sense. Obviously the appointment of the special representative does not imply that Army operations would wind down. It does not require the Army Chief to say so repeatedly. The Kashmiris know fully well that no representative of the Government of India can engage or talk beyond the Constitution. Repeating it endlessly only betrays a lack of confidence. It did not require former Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani to say so when he held rounds of talks with the Hurriyat in 2004. Talks were in fact extremely cordial, with the Hurriyat leaders somewhat overawed by him. As a senior Hurriyat then acknowledged, they fully understood the ambit of engagement.

What Kashmir and the Kashmiris need is not another shopping list of concessions or promises but the shock therapy of absolute candour. Not magnanimity but hard-nosed common sense that former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee displayed. In fact, he is still revered in the Valley more than any other leader. Finding a way out of any mess requires a willingness to listen.

There is no better listener available in Delhi than Mr. Sharma, who has [all the attributes required of an interlocutor](#). He is humble, talks little, understands and feels for Kashmir, and has infinite patience. Plus, he has loads of experience, including a stint in Srinagar during the most difficult days. If press reports are to be believed, he has no restrictive mandate either. Nor should he feel hobbled by the situation on the ground. It is quite often left to Intelligence agencies to do the dirty work, to flirt in the grey areas. Kashmir is nothing if not grey. Mr. Sharma has been appointed interlocutor for exactly that reason: to try to alter the situation in Kashmir by investing in trust, building new bridges and repairing the old.

Given the mandate he received in 2014, Narendra Modi was in a position to do what no Prime Minister in recent times could do. The Jammu and Kashmir Assembly elections too went the BJP’s way. In Kashmir, there was hope that the new BJP government would follow in Mr. Vajpayee’s

footsteps. Even the Mirwaiz welcomed Mr. Modi's election as Prime Minister. But unfortunately, there has been no engagement in Kashmir.

Kashmiris crave peace and desire engagement. Not talking has again brought Pakistan into the game when it was quite out of the equation in Jammu and Kashmir. There is still no great love lost for Pakistan; Kashmiris realise they have no future across the border but it remains the most convenient fallback. Alienation, disillusionment and, of late, anger and disgust bring out the green flags.

Added to that is the Kashmiris' ultimate fear that they could be reduced to a minority in their State. Threats of scrapping Article 370 and 35A of the Constitution only add to Kashmiri apprehensions, leading to unnecessary turns in the debate on autonomy, a legitimate Kashmiri aspiration. The sentiment of subnationalism in Kashmir is not very different from that in most other States, except that in Kashmir it is guaranteed by the Constitution.

The detention and arrest of separatist leaders serves no purpose except that it may provide the interlocutor a ready concession to offer the Hurriyat. Invariably, release of their colleagues is their first demand. To that extent it could facilitate dialogue. But as Ms. Mufti rightly said in Delhi, the National Investigation Agency needs to step back to facilitate an atmosphere for talks. Ironically, Shabir Shah, who was once Narasimha Rao's favourite to be Chief Minister, is lodged in Tihar Jail.

There has been much talk of speaking to the youth in Kashmir, a consummation devoutly to be wished for except that antagonised youth who count are not easy to find in Srinagar. South Kashmir, where the young have been radicalised since Burhan Wani's killing, is a different world, far from accessible. Such is the situation that the long overdue parliamentary election in Anantnag has still not been held.

The much-maligned Hurriyat is far more accessible. Mr. Sharma's old friends should help him reach out to them even if being out is never quite the same as being in the system. Not talking to the separatists would render the dialogue meaningless. The mainstream does not need an interlocutor to engage. As former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah once said, they were always available to Delhi for talks, it is the separatists that Delhi needs to engage with.

Whether credible or not, Hurriyat thinking is still a factor in Kashmir as much as Pakistan. Basically, the Kashmiri is not at peace with the status quo. The peace with honour he bargained for still eludes him. The reason that we have reservations about talking to the Hurriyat and to Pakistan are the very reasons we need to talk to them. The magic of democracy is that hardliners get moderated and mainstreamed. The majority realise that their future lies with India. They deserve a chance.

It is unfortunate that Pakistan chose to immediately react negatively, saying that the interlocutor's appointment was neither sincere or realistic. No wonder we say, who do we talk to in Pakistan?

The Hurriyat must resist the trap. Nothing can redeem their credibility better than engagement. As Mufti Mohammad Sayeed would say, there is no better way but to talk. Not talking is no longer an option, if it ever even was.

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The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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