

## Talk is good: on initiating dialogue within Jammu and Kashmir

The Centre's announcement of an interlocutor to [initiate dialogue within Jammu and Kashmir](#) is a welcome step that has the potential to arrest the dangerous drift in the Valley since the death of Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed in January 2016. The appointment of Dineshwar Sharma, a former Director of the Intelligence Bureau, as a "special representative" also signals a willingness on the part of the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre to walk back from some of its hardened positions: this comes three years after Home Minister Rajnath Singh had called such an exercise "non-productive". Every interlocutor appointed for Kashmir by New Delhi has come to the task in trying circumstances, but none more so than Mr. Sharma. While his appointment allows Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti to check off an item (to facilitate and initiate dialogue with "all internal stakeholders") on the Agenda of Alliance, the binding document of her People's Democratic Party's coalition with the BJP, making such a dialogue meaningful will be a challenging task. For one, there needs to be more clarity from the Centre on the latitude available to Mr. Sharma to confer with individuals and groups in J&K. The recent raids by the National Investigation Agency, among many pro-active measures against separatists, could influence any outreach to Hurriyat leaders, for example. The Hurriyat, without doubt, stands very isolated, but the interlocutor will have to broadbase his schedule significantly to have any chance of winning the interest of civil society in the Valley.

Dialogue is open to all: Mehbooba Mufti

Mr. Sharma also comes to the Kashmir Valley too long after Ms. Mufti assumed the Chief Minister's post in April 2016, since when she has struggled to hold the reins of power as assuredly as her father did. It also comes too long after the stone-pelting protests and the security forces' indiscriminate use of pellet guns after Hizbul Mujahideen 'commander' Burhan Wani's killing hit normal life in the summer of 2016, and subsequently polarised the debate on the next steps. The NDA government has waited more than a year, in which time the valorisation of slain militants has acquired its own momentum and the leadership that protesters heed has become more diffuse. The security situation has deteriorated in other ways too, ranging from militant attacks on Kashmiri policemen to the regular breaches of ceasefire with Pakistan on the border. In fact, the gains of the decade since the 2003 ceasefire have been frittered away. A new generation of youth has taken to militancy since 2013, at least 200 by official estimates. The most poignant evidence of the drift and anxiety in the Valley has been the mystifying allegations of and protests over "braid-chopping". Dialogue is vital. For it to be more than a headline-management exercise, the Central and State governments must rein in the hardliners to enable a genuinely conciliatory environment.

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