

Kashmir: Roundtable Conference Obsession

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The state government has found a new obsession - talking about round table conference as an election gimmick. Peace process is pass'. The latest trend is talking about this bonanza of round table conferences that the people of Jammu and Kashmir are constrained to watch. The prime minister's sincerity to the Kashmir issue is being measured by the number of hours he spent at the round table conference in Delhi in February and the amount of time he would be spending sometime in May in Srinagar.

To sell the round table conference as a marketable branded product of the ongoing peace process, the Jammu and Kashmir chief minister has now begun to state that the second round table would focus on 'quality and quantity'. Already, several people have begun interpreting it in several ways and there is a common belief that unlike the huge mela that the first round table conference turned out to be, the second one in Srinagar would see the participation of only select group of mainstream leaders. Should that be considered as a meaty bait for the separatist leaders to join the event? Or would it actually turn out to be another futile and unscientific exercise in pursuit of peace and solution to Kashmir dispute?

The basic question to be addressed before organizing this event, which is expected to build up a hype with the presence of the Indian prime minister in Srinagar, is not who all should participate in the conference but the very semantics of the round table conference. Has a dialogue process reached a stage where inclusion of all ethnic and religious groups becomes imperative? Secondly, can mainstream leaders, who have no reason to disagree with India and have simply been engaged in their vote bank politics for last several decades of turmoil in the state, be given a space at the dialogue table in the name of representing the ethnic and religious or regional minorities of a pluralistic Jammu and Kashmir? The answer to both these questions is an

emphatic no.

A dialogue process is a continued mechanism of negotiations between state and the parties who do not agree with the former. By that definition, the dialogue process, which New Delhi claims to have been set into motion, is yet to begin. India may have had two round of talks with one faction of Hurriyat and two separate rounds of talks with two other separatist leaders of reckoning but the entire process lacked consistency. Besides, the key issues taken up during these talks, which are in principle not quite a dialogue but meetings, have not even been followed. The confidence building measures talked about have not been implemented to enable the dialogue process to actually take off. Where is the bid to de-militarise the state? Where is the withdrawal and repeal of draconian laws or release of political and innocent prisoners? Besides, there has been no serious efforts to cobble together the divided and fractured separatist groups for talks. All these are important ingredients for an actual dialogue to begin.

It is a fact, that Hurriyat or any other separatist group, singularly, or together, cannot claim to be the sole representatives of the entire state; and that apart from Kashmir Valley, there are other regions of the state including Jammu with its different sub-regions, Ladakh and other parts of the state under Pakistan control that have an equal right to talk about the future of the state and take a final decision. Jammu and Kashmir is a complex state, not only by virtue of the complexity of the Kashmir dispute, but also by virtue of its demographic balance and its ethnic and religious diversity that is overlapping and inter-dependent and cannot be disturbed by any division formula. Therefore, wishes of people of all regions need to be accommodated in the final solution. But it is also a truism that this is not the juncture for involving all other groups.

Process of talks must first begin with the most alienated sections of the society and gradually involve the rest. And before this rest begins, is it not important to also include Jammu and Kashmir based militant organizations in a dialogue. Certainly, the

so-called dialogue process between India and people of Jammu and Kashmir has not reached that stage - not without existence of genuine confidence building measures, not without consistency and continuity in talking and certainly not without the clarity it deserves. Talks are successful only when they begin to remove layers of mutual suspicion and build up a level of trust between two parties who do not agree with each other.

It is at this juncture that other groups can be invited to participate in a dialogue. But then, the moot question is who are these others who should be involved? Should they be the representatives elected for the assembly elections, which are already seen as rigged and at least lopsided, in view of the poor participation of the people, and the known reality of coercive voting patterns? Can their inclusion be justified on grounds of ensuring there are no regional disparities while talking? Certainly not. In fact, the same people who have been responsible for creating these regional disparities and causing alienation of the people cannot be expected to solve the Kashmir dispute or talk of an egalitarian society.

There is a tendency to compare the talks facilitated by non government organizations and talks between government and representatives of Jammu and Kashmir and question why separatist and mainstream leaders cannot sit together for talks with New Delhi. There is a serious flaw in this argument, since talks organized at non-official level have a different concept, scope, range and ramifications from the official one. At the official level, talks require clarity and this clarity needs to be guided by logic that paves way for peace process, not a cosmetic arrangement where peace and solution as per wishes of the people remains elusive.

P.S.

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