

## *Kashmir Policy in Wonderland*

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The Government of India's Kashmir policy gets curiouser and curiouser. It is a pity that the media in our country has signed a treaty of self-abnegation with itself as far as India's Kashmir policy – or Pakistan policy, it is all the same – is concerned, and will determinedly see only the greater wisdom in each twist and turn. For otherwise it could be seen to be the most aimless thing on earth.

I am referring to the sudden abandonment of the policy announced almost six months ago, that an end to the problem would be sought by talking directly to the militant groups headquartered in Pakistan. Now it is said that one Mr K.C.Pant is being sent to Jammu & Kashmir to talk to any body who is willing to talk, and his perambulatory conversations shall be the beginning of the final solution. Since the only people he will not be talking to are the Pakistan based leaders of the constituents of the Shoura-e-Jehad, this means a total abandonment of the policy declared six months ago, with no explanation or excuse offered.

Talking straight to the militant groups made some sense. Whether we like it or not – and whether we like them or not - they are there in Kashmir, they have considerable local support and their weapon power is the specific form in which the 'Kashmir issue' expresses itself today. Initiating the political process by talking to them does not amount to treating them as the sole representatives of the people of the valley, much less the entire State. Yet, since it is the armed confrontation they have undertaken with the Indian State that has brought the political issue to the talking table, it makes some sense to start the talks with them. Most people were happy that the Government of India had seen the sense of this when it announced that it would talk to them.

Now that has been given up for a new 'initiative' whose purpose is difficult to discern. However much Mr Pant may talk to all and sundry in Jammu & Kashmir, that will have little impact on the militancy. The Hizb-ul-Mujahideen is the most Kashmiri (in its composition) of the big militant groups operating in the State, but even the Hizb's high command is in Pakistan. The rest of the groups, such as Lashkar-e-Toiba are not even principally Kashmiri in their composition, and their entire command structure lies on the other side of the border. So what is going to be gained by talking to 'every one who is prepared to talk' in the Indian part of Jammu & Kashmir?

The Hurriyat Conference hit the nail on the head when it resolved officially, in the context of K.C.Pant's visit, that it is 'ready for any kind of negotiation subject to the condition that the process is meaningful, complete and aimed to achieve a target'. By implication, the Hurriyat Conference was saying that sending K.C.Pant on a roving visit is neither meaningful nor

complete nor is it aimed at any perceptible target. It has therefore practically refused to meet Mr Pant. Can one blame them?

But the non-cooperation of the Hurriyat Conference will make Mr Pant's visit even more meaningless. I have no wish to suggest that the Hurriyat Conference is the most representative Kashmiri group. They make the claim for themselves, on the ground that the conglomerate is an umbrella of all the political wings of the militant groups in the Valley. That they are, but the militant groups and their views do not exhaust the entirety of public opinion in the valley, even such opinion as is against continuing to be an integral part of India. A substantial number of Kashmiris, if allowed to express themselves fearlessly, would probably opt for an existence outside both India and Pakistan, whereas the majority of the militant groups are for the integration of Jammu & Kashmir with Pakistan. Yet the militant groups do have sizable following, and as their (self-declared) political representative the Hurriyat Conference is therefore a force to reckon with, if not the sole voice of the Kashmiri people.

More importantly, the Hurriyat Conference is an essential mediator between the Government of India and the Pakistan-based militant groups. That was the reason why, following the announcement of the policy of talks with the militants six months ago, the Government said it would allow a delegation of the Hurriyat to go to Pakistan and take the first step in the process of dialogue. Having announced the policy and the first step, the Government of India did everything possible to sabotage its own avowed policy. It went to the extent of trying to dictate the composition of the mediators team, in particular trying to exclude the one person the militant groups trust most, Syed Ali Shah Geelani. The talks, naturally, never took off.

And now the policy that was never allowed to take off is replaced by a non-policy. Do not the people of the country have a right to demand an explanation?

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