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# Conversations In Kashmir

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It was the final stretch of an exciting but arduous three-week car journey through Kullu-Manali, Lahaul, Ladakh, and Kashmir. We were looking forward to a restful end of our sojourn on the serene waters of the Nageen lake in Srinagar. But that was not to be. The first signs of trouble appeared on the road from Kargil to Srinagar. A heavy security presence is normal in border districts, but this was different. Every 100 metres or so there were armed jawans on guard. Machine gun-mounted trucks were ferrying jawans. At some strategic points there were bunkers, again with guns mounted on them. What was up? Cellphone enquiries proved difficult.

We later learned that all SMS messages had been blocked, as also Blackberrys and pre-paid sim cards. Mercifully, voice connection for post-paid cards was still available, so we could pick up bits of news. There had been incidents of stone-pelting in Srinagar and elsewhere. A young boy had been shot dead in Sopore. More had died in firing in Anantnag. The houseboat owners cautiously guided us in by cellphone, and thanked Allah when we reached the lake.

Some in the party, scheduled to fly back to Delhi, were immediately dispatched to the airport though the flight was hours away. They would have to go through several security checks on the way and at the airport itself. The houseboat owners said they were cancelling all planned arrivals, and guests already in Kashmir were being sent out as quickly as possible. Those of us scheduled to drive back to Delhi were told not to venture anywhere into the city till we left.

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A friend, a senior official who wanted to visit us, was told not to by his security. He informed us on the phone that things were turning ugly and some buildings had been set on fire. Our houseboat hosts insisted we leave at the crack of dawn so that we could get across the Banihal pass into Jammu before the stone-pelting started.

As we rushed down the highway from Srinagar to Jammu, we saw the now familiar string of armed sentries all along the way. We also saw groups of young lads who were already gathering at selected points. There were attempts to stop our vehicle, but we kept going till we reached the pass. Mercifully, nobody followed us and nobody stoned our vehicle. It was probably too early to start the action, and we were not the real targets.

Despite our limited time and restricted movement, we managed to speak to a fair cross-section of people about the ongoing events in Kashmir: boatmen in their shikaras, ordinary people on the streets, businessmen, academics, officials, and even a CRPF jawan. These conversations were fascinating, but too random and brief for any serious assessment. I will summarise them without comment for readers to form their opinion.

There was deep frustration and anguish about the violence. Several persons we spoke to remarked that the cycle of violence is a thriving industry in the Valley. Lots of people are making lots of money out of the huge sums the government spends on housing and feeding the security forces, their logistics and transportation, the arms and ammunition, and the large invisible expenditure incurred on intelligence gathering. There were dark references to puppeteers behind the scenes who manipulate matters to create provocative events and excessive reactions by the agitators as well as the security forces to keep the cycle of violence going.

Everyone we asked expressed goodwill for Omar Abdullah, an honest young man who means well, a breath of fresh air among traditional politicians who are cynical and corrupt. However, everyone also agreed that his inexperience is a big disadvantage in the political minefield of Kashmir. Some felt that he would learn with time, and that he is good for Kashmir in the long run. Others said that he is not engaged enough with ground realities in Kashmir and spends too much time in Delhi.

Most felt that there was organised provocation behind the stone-pelting. Some suggested that the opposition PDP leaders were provoking the young lads to discredit the Omar government. Others suggested that it was the Congress and anti-Omar factions within the National Conference itself. They mentioned that the PDP is strong in Anantnag but could not have possibly provoked the agitations in Srinagar, where they are weak and won no seats. Instead, trouble had erupted in strongholds of the National Conference and the Congress.

The overriding sentiment was the desire for peace so that ordinary people could go about their normal business. But there was not much hope that peace would come soon. Nobody suggested that Pakistani agents were behind the violence, but we heard no general anti-India sentiment either. In fact one person we spoke to, while extremely angry with the CRPF for shooting a young boy, also said that 80 per cent of Kashmiris want to stay with India.

Many felt that a game-changing move that could earn great goodwill for the Centre, enforce restraint on the behaviour of security forces and also pull the rug from under the 'agents provocateurs' would be a withdrawal of the currently invoked Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

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