



Jammu and Kashmir Conclave 2017

UNDERSTANDING KASHMIR

A Composite Dialogue on Peace, Stability and the Way Forward

28th - 29th JULY 2017

NEW DELHI

CONCLAVE SUMMARY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary captures the two-day programme on presentations, panel discussion and interactive dialogue at the Jammu and Kashmir Conclave 2017, Understanding Kashmir: A Composite Dialogue on Peace, Stability and the Way Forward, organised by Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals (BRIEF) on 28th and 29th July 2017 in New Delhi.

The Conclave brought together the Government of Jammu and Kashmir, politicians from across India, civil society organisations, academicians, journalists, diplomatic missions and civilians representing different communities from Jammu and Kashmir, and the rest of India. The discussions were centered on the ongoing situation in Jammu and Kashmir, with a focus on the Kashmir valley, in different areas such as political space, economic situation, youth engagement, role of media and the way forward from the current impasse.

Since the unrest of 2016, various perceptions have been developed about Kashmir not only across India but also across the world. A number of stakeholders have been blamed for it – the media, for its sensational reportage on Kashmir; the politicians and civil society, for failing to address and contain their constituencies; the state government, for failing to bring the Agenda of Alliance into action; the Government of India, for adopting a hard line approach towards Kashmir; and the security forces, for the alleged human rights violations. At this Conclave, an attempt was made to understand the views of stakeholders from J&K and the rest of India regarding the ongoing situation in Kashmir, and devise means to work together as a state and as a country towards bringing peace in the state.

“Alienation of the Kashmiri”

Since the unrest of 2016, one narrative that has been repeatedly projected is that ‘India has lost Kashmir’. This has been common rhetoric in the political circles, in the civil society, among journalist circles and the youth. It was reiterated at the conference that “the Kashmiri has never felt more alienated by India”. If this is, in fact, true, then there are certain questions we need to ask: has the situation arisen because of a failed ‘tango’ between the coalition governments in terms of governance and deliverables of the ‘Agenda of Alliance’? Has India not been able to accommodate the ‘idea of Kashmir’? Where and how can India contribute towards replacing the idea of ‘azaadi’ in Kashmir with a better idea?

Towards this, the political leadership and the civil society of the state have a big role to play. Open, inclusive and honest dialogue with the public and the political leadership should be the larger aim. Such dialogues also need to have a political undertone. This needs to be facilitated at different levels – intra J&K, between J&K, New Delhi and the rest of India, and between India and Pakistan.

“Economic development must complement the dialogue process”

70 percent of J&K’s population is under 31 years of age, yet unemployment rate is very high. While the state boasts of a huge potential in terms of electricity from water resources, exports in horticulture, floriculture and apiculture, there are other unexplored areas like adventure tourism and culinary tourism, which have huge potential for promoting entrepreneurship in the state. One of the biggest challenges faced today is the prevalent corruption in obtaining land and licenses. As a result, a number of youth in the valley are running cafes, art galleries, co-working spaces, design studios etc. without proper licences. While it is important that the government promotes the conventional employment techniques through public sector employment and skill development, it is also important to provide a push for youth



initiatives, which have a much larger message to send to the community. The Jammu and Kashmir Bank, one of the richest banks in India, needs to provide financing to such youth-led initiatives. Such initiatives by the youth to engage with other youth in the state must be welcomed.

“Youth-led development can be achieved through education”

The youth of Kashmir represent a highly ‘misunderstood’ and ‘disengaged’ case in this conflict. Since 2008, it can be observed that the leadership of the Kashmir conflict has moved to the youth. While an attempt has been made, through a number of channels, to talk to the youth, there has been little emphasis on understanding what the youth wants. It is important to remember that the youth we need to address today were born around the turn of the millennium, where most of them have grown up in a situation of conflict. Towards addressing this, an alternative narrative of youth-led development needs to be promoted in the valley. For this, education is an important key. Education is not restricted in terms of academic excellence, rather, is widely distributed over activities like sports, creative arts etc. These are the constructive means of channelizing young energy. For job placements, universities should actively approach large firms for providing yearly placement opportunities.

“60 years of India’s hard work in Kashmir has been washed away by 2-3 media channels”

It is often alleged that there is a sea change today in how the young Kashmiris see the rest of India and vice-versa. Towards this, the onus of responsible journalism lies with both the national media and the local Kashmiri media. The ‘truth’ that is reported by both, often has different sides to it. For instance, between 2002 and 2008, as the media projected a peaceful environment in the valley, 3404 civilians had lost their lives on ground. Whereas, between 2010 and 2017, 639 civilians have lost their lives where the media projects Kashmir as a burning pot of militant activity. Do the media, both local and Kashmiri, become monochromatic with a change in political situation? Or is the media person a pandering constituency, wherein they change the tone according to the audience? Towards an objective of bringing peace in Jammu and Kashmir, the media needs to introspect on the narrative that they bring out on Kashmir, that using improper language towards Kashmiris (or any one for that matter) during prime time debates cannot be tolerated and that an objective and constructive narrative/journalism must always prevail.

Through this Conclave, a number of ideas and opinions were gathered which can take form of short term, medium-term and long term measures in order to build trust and peace in Jammu and Kashmir. Intra-community, intra-state including inter-LoC, and intra-country peace and trust building is most important at this point.

The two day Conclave, Understanding Kashmir, brought together a number of stakeholders with diverse points of view. One of the most important observation from the event was the emphasis on the intra-Kashmir dialogue before talking either to New Delhi or Islamabad. The point of view for bringing inter-community harmony between the Kashmiri muslims and pandits was also welcomed.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Re-starting a meaningful political process between Kashmir and the rest of India, and between India and Pakistan is important
- There is a need to establish communication between the Kashmiri Muslims and the Kashmiri Pandits to de-communalise the discourse on Kashmir
- The mainstream political parties in the valley should go and capture the imagination of the youth through their local workers
- On the political front, both the state and central governments should form a committee to address each point of the PDP-BJP Agenda of Alliance in a timely manner
- There is a need to increase inter-LoC connectivity in terms of economic linkages and people-to-people connectivity
- The civil society has to be the harbinger of change in terms of initiating dialogue between Kashmir and the rest of India
- Greater public and private sector investment needs to be encouraged in Jammu and Kashmir to revive its economy. A conducive environment for the Kashmiri youth to work in other parts of India must be created. The universities across India must facilitate this.
- A Truth and Reconciliation commission needs to be established to not only build inter-community harmony but also check on the human rights violation of the previous years

OPENING STATEMENTS AND INAUGURAL ADDRESS



Opening the Conclave, **Mohammed Saqib, CEO, BRIEF**, welcomed the Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Mehbooba Mufti, and the participants. He said that through this conclave, there is a need to deliberate upon the ideas where different sections in J&K and rest of India could contribute to resolution of the current situation in Kashmir and ideate upon innovative ways towards building a positive narrative about Kashmir.

Vinod Sharma, Political Editor, Hindustan Times, introduced the subject of the Conclave. He noted that the Kashmiri side of the story is not getting conveyed to the people of India. He further stated that unlike previous times, today the people of Kashmir feel abandoned by the people of India. 'Kashmir and India are on two sides today, as has been made evident through various media channels'. This gap needs to be bridged at the earliest. We need to promote exchange of people from J&K and mainland India for the parties to understand the respective narratives. Speaking about the political front, he said that J&K has a 'coalition government but the tango is not happening'. He further emphasised that the more worrying situation is when a psychological cessation is taking place in the Kashmiri mind with respect to the people of India. Therefore, it is of prime importance that the dialogue between Kashmir and rest of India needs to be reconstructed. The onus is on the civil society to reach out.

The **Chief Minister, Mehbooba Mufti**, delivered the inaugural address. She started with the question that how much of India is ready to accommodate the idea of Kashmir? She explained that Jammu and Kashmir, despite being a Muslim majority state, defied the two-nation theory (in 1947) on the grounds of religion and aligned with India. Therefore, special provisions were made in the Constitution of India to accommodate the idea of Kashmir.

“ The idea of ‘Azaadi’ in Kashmir must be replaced with a better idea ”

*Mehbooba Mufti,
Honourable Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir*





Some of the points highlighted by the Chief Minister in her inaugural address include:

- Although Article 35(A) is being debated in the Supreme Court, the Chief Minister stressed that it should not be tampered with. By doing this, India is not affecting the separatists, but weakening those voices that support the Indian flag in Kashmir. Without the existence of special provisions like Article 35(A) and Article 370, there wouldn't be a Jammu and Kashmir.
- Before 1947, Jammu and Kashmir was a hub of trade and travel. There is a need to revive this process, which can be done by taking the Cross-LoC CBMs to the second level wherein it is opened up to everyone and not restricted only to the divided families.
- The roads of Jammu and Kashmir should be open from all sides. Routes such as Kargil-Skardu, Shardapeeth etc. need to be opened for the people of Jammu and Kashmir
- Exchange of students and teachers from PoK and J&K should take place
- Administrative measures such as increase in security and hanging of separatists are only able to contain the situation in Kashmir, but do not address the real problem.
- Finally, the Chief Minister urged the Prime Minister of India to come up with a solution for the current impasse in Kashmir.

“A dialogue between people of Kashmir and the rest of India needs to be reconstructed”

*Vinod Sharma,
Political Editor, Hindustan Times*



SESSION I: SITUATION IN KASHMIR: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The people of Kashmir have diverse, and divergent, aspirations which is reflected in their differing response to the upheaval post 2016. During this period of unrest, it has been observed that the feedback loop between the politicians and the civilians has taken a setback. Within this context, the aim of this session was to discuss the role that the politicians and the civil society can play to address the aspirations of the people, and rebuild and strengthen this feedback loop.

The participants in this session included Nasir Aslam Wani, National Conference, Er. Rashid, AIP, Vikram Randhawa, BJP, Prof Siddiq Wahid, Historian and Founding Vice Chancellor, Islamic University of Science and Technology, Manish Tewari, Spokesperson, Congress, Barkha Dutt, Senior Journalist, and Rahul Jalali, Senior Journalist. The session was moderated by Dr. Shujaat Bukhari, Senior Journalist and Visiting Fellow, BRIEF.

In this session, it was deliberated that there are various ways in which dialogue with the civilians could be rebuilt in Kashmir. However, it was agreed that we need to outline the levels at which the dialogue must take place- between the Kashmiri Pandits and the Muslims, intra Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, between Kashmir and New Delhi, and finally, between India and Pakistan.



L-R: Nasir Aslam Wani, Vikram Randhawa, Shujaat Bukhari, Manish Tiwari, Barkha Dutt, Rahul Jalali, Er. Rasheed, Prof Siddiq Wahid

“It is very necessary to have an intra Kashmir dialogue to address the division taking place within the state”

- Rahul Jalali, Senior Journalist

Some of the key points that were stressed upon during the discussions were:

- The civil society in Kashmir, today, has started to behave like the custodian for truth, morality and law. They need to cultivate a climate of dialogue by giving space to each other for expression of diverse opinions and speak the truth to the political power.
- There is a need to build a climate of dialogue through introspection first
- Any dialogue in Jammu and Kashmir needs to have a political approach behind it. This was evident from the India-Sheikh Accord, and the Vajpayee dialogue with Kashmir and Pakistan. There is a need to think who in Hurriyat should we have a dialogue with.
- Any dialogue initiated by the civil society needs an involvement from the government
- There is a need for an intra-Kashmir Dialogue between Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh.
- There is a need for a 'truth and reconciliation commission' in Jammu and Kashmir
- Politicians and the civil society, together, must undertake the role of counselling of local youth
- The situation in Kashmir needs to be handled politically because any hostility between India and Pakistan has its bearing on Kashmir.
- A policy of hard power, adopted by the Government of India, will not work in Jammu and Kashmir unless it has a democratic element attached to it.
- One of the panellists also suggested that there is a sense of creeping Islamism in Kashmir today

“The politicians have to play a key role in bringing the stone pelters to the mainstream”

- Vikram Randhawa,
BJP



“The civil society needs to speak the truth to those in power”

- Prof. Siddiq Wahid,
Historian

SESSION II: LEVERAGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR KASHMIR'S ECONOMY

The speakers at this session included Mushtaq Wani, President, Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Anil Bhardwaj, Secretary General, FISME, Prabha Rao, Senior Fellow, IDSA, Syed Mujtaba Rizvi, Cultural Entrepreneur, and Rakesh Gupta, President, Jammu Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The session was moderated by Wajahat Habibullah, Former Chairman, National Commission for Minorities. This session was aimed at finding opportunities for Kashmir economy, in both existing and potential sectors, and find constructive means for youth employment in the valley. Some key points discussed in this session were:

- J&K is rich in natural resources. The water resource alone is capable of generating electricity worth 20,000 MW.

“Horticulture, floriculture and apiculture are important areas that we have huge overseas export potential in. Need to encourage stakeholders in this area with modern machinery for packaging and processing”

- Mushtaq Wani, President, Kashmir Chamber of
Commerce and Industry

“One should not rely only on government policy for support of initiatives, because it does not work. Instead, we need to place our confidence in the youth of Kashmir”

- Wajahat Habibullah, Former Chariman,
National Commission for Minorities



- There are over 50 industrial areas in J&K holding approximately 30,000 small, medium enterprises and 100 medium, large enterprises. With various exemptions in excise and tax, the state has also witnessed emergence of meat and food processing industries.
- Horticulture, floriculture, apiculture are important areas where J&K has a huge export potential. This needs to be given a push by providing modern machinery for packaging and processing. Such steps will lead to setting up of more industries and demand for labour.
- The government needs to increase Foreign Direct Investment in J&K. Handicraft clusters need to be created for trades such as carpets and shawls.
- Adventure tourism and cuisine are two important and unexplored areas of J&K which have the potential for helping the economy.
- Tourism has the highest potential for J&K's economy. However, it must be remembered that potential is not proportional to prosperity. For instance, in Singapore, a number of hard and soft strategies were adopted by the government to turn around the country's tourism economy. They contacted airlines, created star airlines, reduced the cost of landing and servicing at airports, and negotiated with hotels. As a result, Singapore was made an attractive tourist destination.
- To generate more jobs in Kashmir, there is a need for private sector to come in and play an important role; the government sector is not enough.
- The youth of Kashmir must be integrated into the skill development program of Government of India
- There is a need to encourage entrepreneurship in the state. A number of young men and women are running cafes, art exhibitions, co-working spaces and design studios, which need to be encouraged by the government. Corruption (in terms of getting a permit/license, land and electricity) is the biggest hindrance to the growth of these initiatives. The internet shutdown also impacts the daily activities.
- J&K lacks mother industries. For instance, a rail coach repair factory can be set up in Jammu from ancillary units. This would result in employment generation in the state.
- It was suggested that the government should let the youth take initiatives on the economic front for tourism development, entrepreneurship etc. For this, the former needs to review its licencing policy. The Jammu and Kashmir Bank - one of the richest banks in India - can be used to finance youth programs. When locals employ the locals, it would have a more constructive than any skill development program by the government.



“Adventure tourism and Kashmiri cuisine are extremely potential sources for helping the economy but are not widely known”

- Anil Bharadwaj, Secretary General, FISME



“Important people engage their favourite people to do things. That is the reality in Kashmir. There is deep rooted corruption”

- Syed Mujataba Rizvi, Cultural Entrepreneur

SESSION III: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN KASHMIR



L-R: Sajjad Sheikh, Insha Mir, David Devadas, Prof. Talat Ahmad, Shazia Bakshi, Samir Yasir

This session was aimed at discussion in constructive ways to engage with the youth in the valley and find out means for increasing the engagement between the youth of Kashmir and of mainland India. This session was very important because 70 per cent of the youth in the Valley is below 31 years of age and in the last few years, there has been a rise in the number of protests led by the youth. This session represented the many voices of the Kashmiri youth, which is often not seen in the media. On one hand, one of the participants questioned that as a Kashmiri, why do they need to prove their 'Indianness' at



“Since 2008, the leadership of the Kashmir conflict has moved to youth. There is a section of youth has grown up in a situation of conflict”

- David Devadas, Author

any platform, and on the other hand there were voices who felt that both the central and state government have broken every promise made to the youth. The speakers in this session included Sheikh Sajjad, Advocate, D. Devadas, Author, In Search of a Future: The Story of Kashmir, Insha Mir, Program Lead – IEF Entrepreneurship Foundation, Shazia Bakshi, Partner, Shiraz Travels & Co-Head, International Engagements Young Indians, CII and Samir Yasir, Journalist. The session was chaired by Prof Talat Ahmad, Vice Chancellor, Jamia Millia Islamia and former Vice Chancellor, Kashmir University. The main points discussed in this session were:

- The Kashmiri youth does not have a role model. The Kashmiri youth is getting radicalised today due to the treatment meted out by the security forces and the apathy felt by them from the rest of India. One of the speakers pointed out that in 2010, as part of the governmental program, 2000 students were sent across India on education scholarship. Most of them came back more radicalised.
- The youth need to be given something they are scared to lose – a life of respect and dignity.
- The frequent internet shutdowns are driving young entrepreneurs out of Kashmir or holding them back from taking initiatives
- To engage with the youth, understanding their demography during conflict situation is important. For instance, the youth that were pelting stones in 2008 and 2010 were not there in 2016. The generation that we need to deal with or focus upon is the millennial generation- people who were born around the turn of the millenium.
- The solution lies in education, economic development and ensuring general well-being of the local citizens. There is a need for finding means to channelise the young energy. Even something like cinemas halls could make a difference.
- Entrepreneurship schemes, that are visible in other parts of India, need to be brought to Kashmir as well.
- Kashmir's academic institutions need to move beyond academics and provide space for activities like sports, creative arts, career counselling etc.
- Job opportunities need to complement education. Like earlier times, a number of large firms can be brought to Kashmir University for placement. An IT hub can be developed in the valley.
- The media also needs to be responsible in its reportage because that has a significant effect on the youth of the valley.

“ Like 2014, a number of business tycoons need to be brought to Kashmir University for campus placement ”

- Prof. Talat Ahmad, Vice Chancellor, Jamia Millia Islamia and Former Vice Chancellor, Kashmir University



SESSION IV: MEDIA AND ITS INFLUENCE IN THE PRESENT SITUATION IN KASHMIR

The speakers at this session included Sanjeev Srivastav, Founder, Edit Platter, Maya Mirchandani, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, Faisal Yaseen, Rising Kashmir, Sushil Pandit, Co-Founder, Roots in Kashmir, Khurram Parvaiz, Human Rights Activist, Srinagar, Ashok Srivastav, Doordarshan News. The session was moderated by Nidhi Razdan, Senior Journalist, NDTV. The discussion revolved between various instances where the onus of responsible journalism was put on both the national media and local media in Kashmir. A number of interjections were made by the panellists among each other. The following points summarise the presentations and interjections by the panellists:

- Between the exaggeration of instances and downplaying of the conflict, the 'truth' lies somewhere in between. This 'truth' is what the media should report about Kashmir, instead of reporting just one side of the story. It was further suggested that civilians can choose what they want to watch.
- One narrative emphasised that the local Kashmiri media has become very monochromatic. One can hardly find any difference between what is reported by the different local media. The reportage on and from Kashmir has become singular and uni-dimensional. A counter narrative was put forth that the Kashmiri media is not monochromatic - a number of editorials and articles in the Kashmiri media have criticised the militants, hurriyat etc. as much as they have criticised the Indian establishment. This is a reflection of a tolerant Kashmir.
- In earlier days, the national media wasn't reporting Kashmir enough, and today the reportage has caused a great damage to the cause of Kashmir in India. For instance, from 2002-2009, the national media reported Kashmir from the government's point of view. While peace was being reported through channels, on ground 3404 civilians had lost their lives. Comparatively, in 2010-2017, 639 civilians lost their lives, far less than the previous eight years. But the media reportage in Kashmir is completely different today.
- The media is neither part of the problem nor solution. Yet, there is a huge difference in what is being reported by the national media and that by the Kashmiri media. While the Kashmiri media is responsible for presenting an exaggerated version of the events, most constructive debated and narratives are being developed by the national media.
- Responding to the accusation put at the Kashmiri media, a local journalist from Kashmir was of opinion that the national media has regressed from what it was 45 years back. In the prime time debates, curse words are used for a Kashmiri. Even the elected government is not spared. Rather, the national media should focus more on the soft stories.
- It was concluded that every media person is a pandering constituency. The media changes its tone according to its audience. All journalists need to introspect on the narrative that they bring out about Kashmir.

“ Media people have been taught that conflict makes the biggest news. In case of Kashmir, with stone pelting and pellet guns, media is bound to pick up stories like this. This is not just about Kashmir ”

- Ashok Srivastav, Doordarsahn



“ There is disconnect between exaggeration of conflict and the absolute playing down of what may or may not happen. The truth lies somewhere in between ”

- Maya Mirchandani, Senior Fellow,
Observer Research Foundation

“ Earlier, the debate was that the Indian media wasn't reporting Kashmir enough. But today, we regret influencing the Indian media to report about Kashmir ”

- Khurran Parvez,
Human Rights Activist



“ All journalists need to introspect on the narrative they bring out about Kashmir. Are there only negative stories to project? Kashmiri media needs to be honest ”

- Sanjeev Srivastav, Founder,
Edit Platter

SESSION V: KASHMIR: THE WAY FORWARD

This session summed up the discussions of all the previous sessions held over a span of two days. This was a solution based discussion on the steps to be taken by different parts of the society in both Jammu and Kashmir and rest of India towards engagement and bringing peace in the state. The panellists included Iftikhar Gilani, Senior Journalist, Dr. Ashok Behuria, Senior Fellow, IDSA, Sanjay Tikoo, President, Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti, G. N. Monga, MLC, Congress, and Prof Gull Wani, University of Kashmir. The session was moderated by Air Vice Marshall Kapil Kak, an independent strategic analyst.



“ First of all, we need to establish communication between Muslims and Pandits. This should precede talks between Delhi and Srinagar. We need to de-communalise the discourse ”

- Dr Ashok Behuria, Senior Fellow, IDSA

“ ‘Azaadi’ in Kashmir means much more than creating the borders. (Increasing) Connectivity is the best answer to azaadi ”

- Iftikhar Geelani, Senior Journalist, DNA



“ There should be no middle path with Article 370 and Article 35A. It should remain as a sacrosanct article ”

- Air Vice Marshall Kapil Kak, Political Strategist



Some of the key points that came out in this session included:

- Use of hard power will not bring out any solution to the current issue. Re-starting a political process between Kashmir and India, and between India and Pakistan is important. The peace process should be a meaningful process.
- There is a need to establish communication between the Kashmiri Muslims and the Kashmiri Pandits. This should precede the talks between New Delhi and Srinagar, as first and foremost, we need to de-communalise the issue.
- Intra-community, intra-state and intra-country trust building is most crucial at this point.
- As the Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir made an effort to understand New Delhi's point of view on Kashmir, the same should be done by the government of India, that is, to understand Kashmir from Kashmiris' point of view.
- Article 370 and Article 35(a) must remain sacrosanct.
- The United Nations Security Council should appoint international interlocutors for looking into the idea of making the Line of Control an international boundary.
- The mainstream political parties in the valley should go and capture the imagination of the youth through their workers.
- On the political front, both the state and central governments should form a committee to address each point of the PDP-BJP Agenda of Alliance in a timely manner.
- 'Azaadi' in Kashmir valley means much more than freedom. Increasing connectivity is the best answer for Azaadi.
- The civil society has to be the harbinger of change in terms of initiating dialogue between Kashmir and the rest of India.
- Greater public and private sector investment needs to be encouraged in Jammu and Kashmir to revive its economy. The unemployed youth should also be given employment in rest of India.
- A Truth and Reconciliation commission needs to be established to not only build inter-community harmony but also check on the human rights violation of the previous years.



VALEDICTORY SESSION

“ We have been consistent on the fact the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India is final, that whatever solution we want to find it has to be within the four walls of the constitution”

“ If we deny that there’s a political element even to the violence struggle, we remove the option of a dialogue in the future ”

“ There can be no denying of the erosion of political space. To that extent I blame both the state and central govt. Both were willing partners of the Agenda of Alliance ”



Bureau of Research on Industry & Economic Fundamentals

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UNDERSTANDING KASHMIR

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29th July, 2017



L-R: Shujaat Bukhari, Omar Abdullah, Afaq Hussain

The Former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Omar Abdullah, participated in the Valedictory Session by addressing the questions raised by the audience and participants of the Conclave instead of delivering a Valedictory address. During the course of this question and answer session, the former Chief Minister raised some important points that the current state government and the central government need to consider. Selective excerpts from the session are given below:

“How can we absolve ourselves of responsibility when incidents like 2010 and 2016 happen? The mainstream political players, the Union of India, all are responsible for what’s happening”

Question: Why is it that politicians speak in different languages during power and after they lose elections?

Omar Abdullah: Why is it that the politicians in Jammu and Kashmir are held to a higher standard? It is politics. Within certain parameters, the mainstream political parties that fight elections have been consistent on some things. We (the National Conference) have been consistent on the fact that the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India is final, that whatever solution we want to find it has to be within the four walls of the constitution. Positive and constructive engagement with Pakistan is (also) necessary. When (the) situation demands, we are capable of positive engagements. When Kashmir was flooded, and there was no way to reach out to political parties, I wrote handwritten letters to about 8 or 9 political leaders. We discussed hours on end to put the state out of the mess.

Question: In 2008, you said in parliament that not an inch of land will be given to amaranth pilgrims. But in your tenure, thousands of rohingyas settled in Jammu and Ladakh. Why did you settle them there?

Omar Abdullah: They (the Rohingyas) are United Nations’ refugees. The state did not put them there, the centre did. It is an issue of the MEA.

Question: How much are the mainstream parties responsible for their own shrinking space in Kashmir and how do they ensure that this does not happen to them again?

Omar Abdullah: How can we absolve ourselves of responsibility when incidents like 2010 and 2016 happen? The mainstream political players, (and) the Union of India, are responsible for what’s happening. We know that Pakistan fishes in troubled waters, (but) they are not the creators of this sort of agitation that we have seen in 2016, 2010, and 2008. There is a fair amount of blame to be shared across the board.

Question: Is there a new threat in Kashmir in terms of ISIS flags and Zakir Musa?

Omar Abdullah: Of course it is a threat! But, it is dangerous if we see everything through the lens of Zakir Musa. Again, we are giving an easy exit to the Government of India. The largest militant organisation operating in the valley today is the Hizbul Mujhaadeen. It is made up of Kashmiri youngsters and their aim is political – to separate Jammu and Kashmir from India. Their aim is not same as Zakir Musa. If we deny that there’s a political element even to the violence struggle, we remove the option of a dialogue in the future. Zakir Musa is an extension of religious driven organisations.



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Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals (BRIEF)
B-59, South Extension Part II, New Delhi-110049, India
+91-11-41066328; info@briefindia.com
www.briefindia.com