Kashmir: The Society under seige

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The international focus on Kashmir as a contentious issue between India and Pakistan has, by and large, remained oblivious to the internal volatile situation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. In a bid to pursue their respective agendas, the international players are engaged in tuning their policies on resolution of Kashmir within the dynamic of international relations and strategic equations in the region. In this process, the vital issue of weaponisation leading to the brutalisation of society appears to have been ignored at the peril of a peaceful, multicultural and tolerant society gradually degenerating into a criminalised haven.

The implications would be graver in case the areas emerges as a militarized zone manned by private jehadi armies to destabilise the South and Central Asian region. It is curious to note that the US seems to be apprehensive and remains concerned enough in verifying the presence of Al-Qaeda in J&K state, without realising that all the Jehadis operating in J&K, Pakistan and/or Afghanistan share an umbilical chord with Al-Qaeda ideologically, strategically and logistically. It would be futile to search the terrorists with a specific trade-mark and it would equally complicate the task set by international coalition against terrorism. Moreover, the insistence on identifying a specific brand of terrorism leaves a room for legitimising the other brands of terrorism.

A study of developments in Kashmir provides enough material in understanding the rise of phenomenon of terrorism and its international linkages. However, the crucial issue of societal changes brought about by the introduction of gun-culture remains pivotal in understanding and dealing with the phenomenon of terrorism. This understanding would help in devising strategies in dealing with the phenomenon of terrorism in future.

The present discussion is confined to an analysis of the emergence of new social norms and behaviour due to the impact of longer spells of terrorism in society. It is equally important to note that these new norms and behaviour patterns facilitate the terrorist operations and create fertile ground for launching new operations in future.

Weaponisation of the Society

The 'gun' became visible in Kashmir in the year 1989. In a bid to assume supremacy and before targeting the state structures it choose to silence the peace constituency in society. Thus, the first targets of the gun were the political activists, intellectuals, media persons and moderate religious

leaders. The killings were justified, first, in pursuance of a struggle towards some vague notion of 'Independence' which was later projected as a struggle towards the 'supremacy of Islam'. The raison d'etre of a struggle for 'Independence' or 'supremacy of Islam' was never explained. Anybody questioning the motives or seeking explanations was silenced at the gunpoint. The confusion about the rationale was and continues to remain the hallmark of militant violence in Kashmir at the societal levels.

However, the regular supply of arms and ammunition from Pakistan, apart from the training facilities provided to militants, resulted in proliferation of the small arms in society in a big way. It resulted in weaponisation of sections of society leading to a mindset that revelled in brutal display of violence. Over a period of time, the typical Kashmiri cultural mosaic, social norms and values have been transformed to a major extent. Even the behaviour patterns, idioms and expressions of the people gradually changed. The terminologies became jingoistic and expressions were cloaked in military terms. The killings of more than 30,000 people, majority of them innocent civilians, destruction of property and infrastructure worth millions of rupees, the displacement of about half a million people from their homes and hearths and ecological devastation is another subject of discussion and analysis.

The easy availability of small arms has made Kashmir society vulnerable to marauders defined in the local media as 'unidentified gunmen'. These 'unidentified gunmen' operate ruthlessly with impunity not in pursuit of some vague goal of 'Independence' or work towards establishing the 'supremacy of Islam'. They do it precisely to keep the society under their stranglehold. The horrendous details of their exploits are widely reported in the local media. They loot, kill and abduct people. They have introduced most horrible forms of torture and most heinous forms of killings to create terror and fear among sections of population. Their services are also hired, as reported in the local media, to settle scores or carry out assignments. They have been found involved in settling family disputes and grabbing properties.

In sum, they try to operate as a state within a state. The difference is that they draw their frameworks of operation and code of conduct themselves which, more often than not, vary from area to area and individual to individual or from group to group. Needless to mention that these codes are archaic, mediaeval, dreadful and are directed towards setting up a jungle rule.

Metamorphosis of a Society

The continuing terrorist operations in J&K have severely impacted the social psychology of people particularly the youth in the society. The continuing terrorist operations in J&K have severely impacted the social psychology of people particularly the youth in the society. The

continuing spell of violence has created a grave sense of insecurity among every section of society. This has dwarfed their creative and intellectual capabilities, which was the pride of their identity historically. They may express their resentments privately in hushed tones but they have lost the courage to voice their resentments collectively and publicly. It is pathetic to note that the intellectuals are using poetic expressions couched in mysticism and poets and writers are frequently using metaphors and symbols to give vent to their agonies and the miseries heaped on society due to violence.

The most alarming impact of this violence is that people have become incommunicable individually and collectively. The interesting rule, which has emerged from all this, is not the *'survival of fittest'* but *'survival of meekest'* in society. It is also important to note that the bridges of trust between the people and among sections of society have broken down. And ironically these bridges have broken down at the familial levels also.

It needs to be recognized that this type of society provides a fertile ground for the terrorist operations. They may lie low for some time but they can strike at will according to their convenience. The society reduced to a stock of dumb driven cattle offers least resistance and prefers to endure oppression in order to survive physically. The many fold increase in the number of patients with emotional and psychological disorders and reported regularly in the local media projects another dimension of cult of violence in Kashmir society. The local media also reports about the many-fold increase in the sales of sedatives and sleeping tablets consumed by the people to distract their attention from the horrors of ongoing violence in society.

The free flow of money from Pakistan and other foreign countries has created new social classes who are setting a new normative order impinging upon the normal civil society culture and values. During the last one decade of militancy and violence the real estate prices in Kashmir have risen many hundred-fold, highest in the entire South Asia. The rise of a nouvea rich in Kashmir society has created a huge imbalance at the societal level and it also holds the temptation that militancy and terrorism is a lucrative avocation.

Reconstruction necessary

The reconstruction of societies which have undergone longer spells of violence at the psychological and emotional levels is a challenging task. The response of the State in J&K remains confined to dealing with the situation as a law and order problem at the internal level and responding to insurgency through military means. This response has resulted in putting the state structures back in place. It has also rehabilitated the confidence of people in the state.

However, the societal structures and value systems remain bruised and dwarfed and remain beyond the initiatives of the state. The diplomatic initiatives to stop, in terms of Indian Government's articulation 'cross-border' terrorism may be a first step to end violence in the state. However, the tensions in the society would remain until a vigorous campaign of de-weaponisation of sections of society is not undertaken. It would go a long way in hampering the fresh operations of the terrorists and ultimately strengthening the international initiatives of war against global terrorism.

The Aftermath:

The consequences of the current social situation in Kashmir need to be comprehended within a larger framework. At one level this chaotic situation enthuses the sections of young and vulnerable minds to hold up the society according t their whims and fancies at the gun-point. Consequently, this mindset sustains terrorism for longer periods and makes it only manageable rather than getting it eradicated. The functioning terror groups who operate as machines are always ready to work for something including Jihad, which provides a sense of legitimacy to their operations. Their basic ideology rejects the use of peaceful political and democratic means in airing and seeking the redressal of grievances; they need the grievances to continue so that they could use the grievances as a legitimising factor of terrorism. In fact, such false sense of legitimacy behind the idea of violent resistance has been the locomotive of terrorism in many corners of the world.

In a larger context, this false sense of legitimacy helps in weaving such outfits together in global terrorist networks. The networks tend to connect these separate groups through spurious ideological links and sustain them globally. The globalisation of the phenomenon of terror is an unintended consequences of the communication revolution that has shrunk the world in recent years and facilitated communication with such lethal groups with an astounding facility. These networks sustain violence worldwide and draw their sustenance from them. The rising factor of socio-economic insecurity that the world is witnessing nowadays also helps these networks in gathering the human resource around their causes. In turn, the instability caused through violence by these networks has a devastating impact on socio-economic conditions making the situation bleaker again.

It is important to note that such vicious cycle of violence induces more and more young people to take up the guns to avenge the injustices heaped upon them by unbridled use of gun. In this manner they become unwitting participants of a deadly circle of terrorism. It is time to shift focus on the horrendous potential and social consequences of violence in Kashmir, rather than assigning it to the dynamics of international relations.