

Healing Touch 2.0

www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/healing-touch-20/article9051187.ece

Understand why Kashmiri youth are expressing their anger through stone-pelting. It is too simplistic to blame it on 'alienation'

The Prime Minister on Sunday declared “*Ekta*” (unity) and “*Mamata*” (affection/compassion) as the “opinion of all of us, the 125 crore people of the country — from the village head to the Prime Minister — that any life lost in Kashmir, be it of any youth or security personnel, is our loss, the loss of the nation”.

Weeks earlier, he made a significant policy note on Kashmir at an all-party meeting, a combination of reaching out to the youth and other sections of society, a warning to those who perpetrate violence and provide it political support inside and outside India, and a comprehensive look at Jammu and Kashmir, including Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. His emphasis that J&K “is not only a matter of our territorial integrity but also defines our nationality” should be the starting point. What else could be the ingredients of a successful approach?

A renewed approach

Violence is likely to decline, giving space to address the larger problem. Outside the anti-Indian postures, there is an emerging reference to loss of business, injuries and lives. The primary focus of the renewed approach should be aimed at the youth and civil society. Violence and street protests led by the Kashmiri youth started as a leaderless movement. A section within the Valley (led by the separatists through their protest calendar) and outside (Pakistan through its renewed international push) is hijacking the youth anger and exploiting it for political reasons. Such hijacking of street anger had taken place even during the Intifada in Palestine and the Arab Spring. The state and civil society should be aware of this.

Today, despite intense street violence, the situation is not totally lost. By nature, the youth have to be angry; leaders are supposed to shape this anger by positively channelling them. The ruling Peoples Democratic Party and Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti can fill the leadership void with a careful strategy and a common-sense approach. Using her father Mufti Mohammad Sayeed’s legacy and support from New Delhi, “Healing Touch 2.0” could be one such approach.

The late Mufti, as Chief Minister in the early 2000s, covered significant ground in Kashmir through his innovative “healing touch”. It was both a political slogan and a purposeful programme of action. Ms. Mufti should revisit this and tailor it to suit contemporary demands. Such a strategy has to be complemented and provided space by New Delhi.

First, Healing Touch 2.0 should understand why the Kashmiri youth are angry and expressing it through stone-pelting. It is too simplistic to blame it on “alienation” and “security forces”. The local separatist leadership believes “azadi” as an answer, whereas the leadership outside the Jawahar tunnel finds “assimilation” as a solution. From the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act to failure of the institutions, the reasons are well known; Ms. Mufti would know the pulse better. Second, one has to look beyond the Banihal Pass, and the Zoji La. The dissatisfaction in J&K is not just vis-à-vis “India” and does not pertain only to “Kashmiri” youth. There is angst among youth from Jammu and Ladakh as well, especially over the regional differences between Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. The silence or indifference in other parts of J&K to the current violence in the Valley highlights the differences within. Healing Touch 2.0 will have to aim at building a “Naya J&K” collectively.

Third, religious expressions in recent years are getting superimposed on the regional differences. The debate over Pandit resettlement in the Valley underlines the polarisation. The new outreach will have to repair the social fabric within J&K. Fourth, the local leadership has for long been blaming “alienation” and thereby outsourcing the problem to New Delhi. What was conveniently ignored is the quality of education and quantity of employment that lead to

empowerment. The “youth bulge” in J&K has to be transformed into a demographic dividend by making them a quality workforce, not only within, but in the rest of India and abroad. Education and employment have to be supplemented with empowerment; New Delhi will have to contribute to this.

Accommodating diversity

A strong India has to be recognised by every identity within — regional, religious and linguistic. This will happen only if the Centre recognises the differences. India has witnessed demands ranging from Nagalim to Dravidanadu. Such expressions need not necessarily be linked with demands for separation. The larger “Idea of India” should integrate other “regional ideas” and provide space within. That is what *Insaniyat 2.0* should aim at: accommodating the “ideas of Kashmir” along with its multiple identities. There should be a clear political articulation that the Kashmiris will not be “assimilated” and existing political arrangements such as Article 370 will not be abrogated.

There will be differences. If the Valley does not want to celebrate August 15, let us accept it. If a section does not want to sing the national anthem, so be it. Let a few flags — green or black — and some slogans by a section not interfere with the larger process of a matured democracy that India is.

If we believe in *insaniyat* (humanity) and *mamata*, and practise *jamhooriyat* (democracy), it will inevitably lead to *ekta*. Not the other way around.

D. Suba Chandran is a Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru.