

Why Jammu and Kashmir, and New Approach to Terrorism will Remain a Key Political Issue

Arun Jaitley

During the course of election campaign, whenever issues relating to the terror attack at Pulwama and the Air Strikes at Balakot are raised, India's Opposition is on the back-foot. Why are national security and terrorism related issues being made into subject matters of electoral debate? This is a question they raise.

India's opposition argues that elections have to be fought on the 'real issues' and not on the issues of national security. It is my endeavour to argue that national security and terrorism are the most important issues which concern India in the long run. All other challenges are capable of early resolution.

The conventional election issues

Conventional election issues in India related to poverty alleviation, employment generation, improving growth rates, the quality of life of Indians, provision for quality healthcare and education, besides creating a world class infrastructure, and improving the quality of rural infrastructure. There are also additional areas which related to the quality of leadership and probity in public life and preservation and strengthening of democratic institutions. With India, for the past five years, maintaining the global 'bright spot' position as the fastest growing major economy, there is a lot more revenue available to the State year after year, to complete these unfinished tasks.

Compared to a very slow poverty depletion till 1991, the period subsequent to that has seen faster depletion of poverty. The 2011 Census mentioned the BPL figure of 21.9 per cent. By 2021, this figure should be comfortably below 15 per cent and in the decade thereafter we will probably see poverty substantially depleted to negligible levels. Urbanisation will increase, the size of the middle-class will grow and the economy will expand manifolds. These will add to the number of jobs and as the experience of past three decades have shown in the liberalised economy, every section of citizens will benefit. These are all challenges that India is capable

of capturing and resolving over the next decade or two. The India of 2030 and the India of 2040 will present a completely different look with the socio-economic profile of the population having substantially changed. In this changed India, there will be a lesser role of caste in politics, the quality of elected representatives will improve and obviously the standards of probity will be much tighter.

Terrorism and national security

While the other above mentioned issues are all capable of resolution, where does India stand on the issue of national security and terror? Punjab, North-East and in the South, peace has been established. There is Maoist terror in the central parts of India. The region where it operates is restricted, its appeal is narrow. As the economic profile of India move upwards, it will become extremely difficult for the Maoists to sustain their violent movement to overthrow democracy. The security 'might' of the State is far superior to handle this movement.

The same, however, can't be said of what is happening in the State of Jammu and Kashmir and terrorism emanating from region.

Kashmir and terrorism

The most important issue which, thus, confronts India in the short, medium and even the long terms, is how do we handle the State of Jammu and Kashmir and terrorism emanating from Pakistan and from within?

The Congress Party is identified with the creation of the problem itself. When Pakistan did not reconcile to Kashmir being a part of India, the Congress Party wished the issue away. It was its historical blunder on account of which we lost one-third of our territory. Instead of working for total integration, the party wanted a loose and liberal constitutional connect between rest of the nation and the State under an erroneous impression that such an arrangement would further the cause of integration. Article 370 was disastrously thought out as a constitutional connect

between rest of the country and the State. Article 35A was surreptitiously introduced in 1954. It catered to a separatist psyche and legitimised discrimination. The NC-Congress relationship was a paradox. From total trust in Sheikh Sahab to his arrest in 1953, from his reinstallation in 1976 to the dismissal of the Farooq Government in 1984 and installing a Government headed by Ghulam Mohammad Shah were amongst the many pitfalls. The 1957, 1962 and 1967 and even 1988 were rigged elections thereby leading to further alienation of the people. All warnings were ignored and the separatists virtually took-over the State in 1989-90 leading to a violent civil disobedience. Atrocities were practiced on the minorities, including the Kashmiri Pandits, the Sikhs and others and an ethnic cleansing of the minorities was undertaken. The UPA wasted its 10 years with a set of sham policies while the Jamaat-e-Islami and other fundamentalist organisations were busy transforming the liberal Islam of 'Sufism' in the Valley to a more fundamentalist form of 'Wahhabism'. The NDA experimented supporting a regime of the regional mainstream party in the State. Obviously, the experiment did not succeed since the PDP could not come out of the clutches of the Jamaat-e-Islami agenda. Thereafter, Central Government, for the last few months, has sent a clear message that terrorism will not be acceptable in the valley. Terrorists in large numbers are being liquidated by our security forces. Their modules are being cracked up. The rule of law is effectively being imposed. The activities of the separatists have been curtailed. Terrorism from across the border is attacked at the point of origin. Our historical view on Article 370 and Article 35A continues to guide our vision.

Who is best suited to eliminate terror?

To an emerging economy the cost of fighting terror and its perpetrators across the border is huge. Civilian lives are lost. Our security personnel are martyred. The security apparatus interferes in the lives of ordinary citizens. The aftermath of terror and all preventive action creates social tensions and even a strife. Development in the State of Jammu and Kashmir has suffered due to terror. Tourism has been adversely impacted. Both democracy and secularism have been a casualty in the Valley. The cost of maintaining a large security force and equipment amounts to money meant for development and poverty alleviation is spent on fighting terror or its handlers.

How can Jammu and Kashmir, the attitude of Pakistan and terrorism not be important issues in India?

An important question before the country is – who is best suited to handle the issue of Jammu and Kashmir and terrorism? It obviously can't be solved by those whose policies created the problem and are no longer willing to change their track. It can't be solved by those who linked battle against terror with the vote bank politics of their political parties. It can't be solved by those who believe that a loose constitutional connect will lead to integration even though the experience of seven decades is to the contrary. This failed obsolete thought has to be rejected. The people of Jammu and Kashmir have to be at the centre point in our strategy. They deserve a special relationship with India; they deserve opportunities, peace and security of life; they need freedom from terror. A State free from terror itself will imply much lessor security presence.

Terror supported from across the border can't be fought either with velvet gloves or a policy of appeasement. The two regional parties have played a disappointing role. Of late, they are more strident in advocating secession of the State if firm measures are taken. The soft measures have not worked. The current leadership of the Opposition parties has hardly a roadmap except to tread on the path to disaster.

This challenge can obviously be resolved with a fresh approach which is uncompromising on terror, uncompromising in its determination to enforce the rule of law and committed to total integration. A strong Government and a leader with clarity alone is capable of resolving the Kashmir issue. This will necessarily require reversal of the historical blunders of the past.

The issue of Jammu and Kashmir and terror continues to remain the biggest challenge before India. It relates to our sovereignty, integrity and security.

(The author is Union Finance Minister)