

## Kashmir 'packages': when will they ever learn?

Nothing epitomises the quiescence of the powers that be in [New Delhi](#) towards the sensibilities of people of Jammu and Kashmir better than the cynical 'packages' handed out during every prime ministerial visit.

Despite the hype created by the state's Congress-Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Jammu and Kashmir last week turned out to be yet another damp squib. It has not only exacerbated the general disillusionment with the ruling coalition but also drawn severe flak from those very sections that clearly were being wooed with an eye to the forthcoming assembly elections.

In yet another attempt to assuage the bitter memories of the Kashmiri Pandit community and persuade them to return to the valley, Manmohan Singh announced a house building grant of Rs.750,000 for each family, continued relief for two years till they resettle and grants for the restoration of agricultural holdings and orchards which had been abandoned in the wake of militancy and migration. However, he neglected to add that 'conditions apply'.

First, they will have to form a 'group housing society.' Somewhat like Alice, one is driven to ask, who is 'they.' It is common knowledge that the community is divided into several antagonistic factions and no one body can be called fully representative.

The second caveat is that the state government has to identify and acquire land for society. Apart from the fact that this is a very scarce commodity and several past efforts to locate a secure haven in south Kashmir have come to naught, there is also no commitment to meeting the cost of the land in the valley, which is as high as in many parts of Delhi! If the hugely deficit state budget is to meet this burden the scheme is clearly a non-starter.

The fine print underscoring the offer of grants for restoration of agricultural holdings and orchards is that this was 'under consideration.' Not even the most naive would be ignorant that this is the classical bureaucratic euphemism for obfuscation. Those savvier with ground realities have understandably expressed their cynicism.

Unfortunately, nobody thought it necessary to advise Manmohan Singh that it is totally unrealistic to expect that such lands would be lying uncared for after two long decades! In actual fact, they have been sold off or leased out for cultivation if not illegally occupied by unscrupulous elements.

It should therefore come as no surprise that all sections of the Pandit community have expressed their resentment in no uncertain terms. Both factions of Pannun Kashmir came together to condemn the 'package' and accused state Congress president and central Water Resources Minister Saifuddin Soz of having 'mised' the prime minister. The Kashmir Samiti Delhi called it 'unacceptable' while the J and amp;K Minority Forum has been equally dismissive.

The relief announced for meeting the long-standing demands of the refugees of 1947 from Pakistan-administered Kashmir and West Pakistan who have settled in and around Jammu is even more equivocal. For the former, in a gesture of apparent generosity, the compensation for their lost lands of Rs.40,000 per acre declared by the centre in 2000 but not delivered was raised to Rs.200,000 per acre.

Although Rs.500 million has been earmarked for this, there is no assurance as to when this would be actually distributed. The displaced persons from West Pakistan were sought to be mollified with vague proposals of technical training for youth and bank loans without collateral for self-employment. With a resentful sense of *deja vu* the leaders of both groups, which include members of the Congress party, have summarily rejected all these offers.

At a function a few days ago, Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad's mournful pleas for 'better appreciation instead of outright criticism' of this 'meaningful beginning' were met with angry outbursts and even a walkout by some.

In another telling statement to the media, Shakeel Qaladar, president of the Chamber of Industry in Kashmir expressed his wish to call upon the prime minister and 'humbly' return the 'central industrial package' extended in 2004, which had neither been effective in making Kashmir a 'preferred' place for investment, nor had it succeeded in reviving the eroded industrial base.

According to him, all the reported new industrial investment of Rs.40 billion had gone to Jammu, thereby creating a further schism between the two regions.

And, to top it all, the highlight of the prime minister's two-day programme at which the 390-MW Dul Hasti hydel project was 'dedicated to the nation', instead of being greeted as a welcome step towards meeting the state's chronic energy shortage, has only generated more sarcastic comment.

Not only has the project been 25 years in the building (the foundation stone was laid by Indira Gandhi in 1983) during which period the cost escalated from Rs.1.83 billion to Rs.52.28 billion but the expectation that it would be transferred to the state as recommended by the Rangarajan Committee has been belied.

On the contrary, Power Minister Sushilkumar Shinde only succeeded in putting salt on the wound by gratuitously announcing that the state's share of free power from the project would be increased from 12 percent to 13 percent and completion of all ongoing central power schemes would be 'speeded up!'

In the context of the prime minister's own observation that regrettably a mere 1,865 MW or 12 percent of the state's hydro potential of 15,000 MW has been energised, the dismal performance of the NHPC in utilising only Rs.6.88 billion of the Rs.180 billion allotted in the 2004 'package' for new projects like Uri II and Kishenganga has seriously damaged the credibility of the central government.

With the visible reduction in the levels of violence and tension and the optimistic signals emerging from the new dispensation in Pakistan, one would have expected New Delhi to be more proactive in seizing this opportunity to generate greater confidence amongst the citizens of the state about their future. Instead, the mandarins of the establishment by their callous obfuscation continue to propagate the age-old, insensitive mindset that has bedevilled centre-state relations for decades. When will they ever learn?

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