

Managing Perceptions

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India should be more worried about the ground realities in Kashmir rather than the perceptions of other countries

The Centre's decision to take another group of envoys on a guided tour of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and the stated hope of the Ministry of External Affairs that these tours will become a regular feature, point to a belief that these visits have been productive.

Clearly, the government, which has been under considerable international pressure to lift restrictions in the former State, has managed to arrange these three visits without any incident. The delegations have been taken to meet with local groups, and shown a glimpse of 'normalcy' in the Kashmir Valley, with shops open, people out on the streets, and boating on the Dal Lake. After these tours, no envoy has come forward with any negative account, which indicates that at least for the moment, the government's narrative has prevailed.

The visits have also smoothed other diplomatic exchanges.

U.S. Ambassador Kenneth Juster's trip to J&K paved the way for President Donald Trump's upcoming visit, and the latest visit by European Ambassadors was timed just before Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar travels to Brussels to prepare for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip next month for the EU-India summit. However, the government must recognise that these gains in the immediate present are superficial in the absence of a change in the situation in Kashmir.

The Ground Reality

- It would not have escaped anyone's attention that these tours are tightly controlled, and the people meeting the foreign guests in the confines of the Raj Bhavan are handpicked by the government.
- The European delegates in fact who accepted New Delhi's invitation on this trip had earlier opted out in order to request freer access and meetings with leaders in detention, but the government refused to relent.
- The chimera of 'normalcy' seems patently fragile: the visit had to be postponed by a day due to a bandh call in the Valley; and just a day after the visit, the Internet was snapped once again due to security concerns.
- It is also puzzling how the government, which has repeated often that J&K is an "internal affair", squares it up with this new policy of conducting tours for the international community.
- The truth is, managing India's image is important, but the government's primary responsibilities still lie within its borders — responsibilities to the people of J&K, who have yet to see a return to normalcy; to those detained in and outside J&K, including sitting Member of Parliament and octogenarian Farooq Abdullah, against whom little evidence of wrongdoing has been furnished; and to the people of India as a whole, who are yet to see a credible path to the peace and prosperity that was promised when the momentous decision on Article 370 was announced last August.
- It is their legitimate expectations, not those of the international community, which must be a priority for the government.

SOURCE: *The Hindu*