



Session on
Stone-Pelting as a Political Problem: Kashmir in Comparative Perspective
with
Sumantra Bose
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“Stone-pelting is the latest manifestation of an unhealed trauma and an unaddressed political problem.” Professor Sumantra Bose was addressing a collaborative event of Aspen Institute India and the British Council in Kolkata on 24th September 2010. Sumantra Bose is professor of international and comparative politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His books include *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace* (Harvard, 2003, published in India by Sage), and *Contested Lands: Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia, Cyprus and Sri Lanka* (Harvard, 2007, published in India by HarperCollins India).

The deep sense of oppression and grievance being vented by the stone-pelters goes back sixty years. The renewed turmoil must be understood in such a time-frame. The last twenty years, in particular, have seen the brutalisation of local society, particularly in the Kashmir Valley. An entire generation has grown up and come of age in an environment of repression and violence, observed Professor Bose.

This is the generation of "stone-pelters", for whom the stone has replaced the AK-47s wielded by so many of the previous generation during the 1990s. A combination of near-term, medium-term and long-term factors have come together to generate the most severe unrest seen in Kashmir since the early 1990s.

Continuing unrest in Jammu & Kashmir is largely due to the failure of successive Indian governments to effectively tackle one of their most pressing domestic problems, Sumantra Bose argued. Over six years, two UPA governments showed little initiative to take forward the opportunity, provided by the decline of armed militancy, to mend the fraught relationship with the people of the Kashmir Valley.

Delhi's response to the latest turmoil has until recently been a combination of hand-wringing, indecision and the familiar although well-founded claims of Pakistani instigation. The Centre's failure to grasp the issues at hand has been compounded by the indifferent performance of the state government elected at the end of 2008, observed Professor Bose. The head of that government, Omar Abdullah, has been out of touch with the grassroots of even his own party, the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference.

Professor Bose drew parallels to the classic 1966 movie 'The Battle of Algiers' and screened some film clippings. In the concluding scene of this classic film, which depicts in riveting style the struggle for Algeria between France and Algerian nationalists, a harried French police officer exhorts a stone-throwing crowd of Algerians over a hand-held loudhailer: "Go home! What do you want?" After a brief pause, a chorus of voices answers from behind a curtain of tear-gas: "Istiqlal! Istiqlal!" (Independence!).

Professor Bose concluded by saying that the Kashmiri equivalent of the French solution in early 1960s Algeria - the withdrawal of Indian troops and Kashmir's independence - is neither viable nor desirable in Jammu & Kashmir today. The state of Jammu & Kashmir is diverse, and most of the Jammu region and the entire Ladakh region are not at all involved in the agitation against Indian authority gripping the valley.

There are no easy solutions and no unanimous path to be followed. Yet twenty years after the eruption of insurgency, hostility and resentment run strong in Kashmir. A fundamental improvement of this poisoned relationship is no easy task, but it must still be attempted, asserted Professor Bose.

The session was skilfully moderated by General (Retd.) Shankar Roy Chowdhury, Former Chief of Army Staff & Former Member of Parliament, who shared his views and experiences of the Kashmir situation. A lively discussion followed which made this an "interactive" session in the true sense of the word on one of the most pressing issues of current times.

This was the first collaborative event of Aspen Institute India with the British Council in Kolkata, following the launch of the Kolkata chapter a few months ago.

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Kolkata