

Only words may not be enough

No time should be lost to set up a House panel on Kashmir

P rime Minister Narendra Modi has finally held out some hope for the strife-torn Valley, which has been through one of its worst phases in recent years. Mr Modi chose Independence Day to reach out to the Kashmiris, saying a solution could be found by embracing them and not through 'gaali or goli.' The call for compassion not coercion comes as a reminder for some, of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's famous 'jhamooriyat and insaniyat' (democracy and humanity) remark. The prime minister's comments must be followed up with concrete action for them to have any meaningful effect.

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It is important that words and intent go hand-in-hand. Mr Modi has changed his stance on the current Kashmir crisis once too often. When he first spoke, at a rally in Madhya Pradesh last year, he had borrowed from Mr Vajpayee's Kashmir policy of 'insaniyat' but within a few days of that, however, Mr Modi uttered the 'Balochistan' word, leaving Kashmiris wondering why they were being treated as pawns in a game that India wanted to play with Pakistan. Even at the time that the PM was delivering his speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort, the common Kashmiri was living through curfew and an Internet ban. For over a year since the killing of militant commander Burhan Wani in July last year, the Kashmiris have been living abnormal lives and have been rattled by the possibility of Article 35A – which guarantees a special status – being tweaked by the courts.

The 'no gaali or goli' line can be the much-needed balm provided it goes beyond rhetoric. Mr Vajpayee had followed up on his outreach by initiating a dialogue with different stakeholders. He had even sent his home secretary to Srinagar to open a channel with the Hizbul Mujahideen. Few expect Mr Modi to replicate Mr Vajpayee's model but a beginning can be made by setting up a panel of parliamentarians – a promise the government made last year, after home minister Rajnath Singh led an all-party delegation to Srinagar. Momentum is key and no time should be lost in setting up a panel that will carry the weight of Parliament. It is in India's interest to move to the next level in Kashmir.