Irish Way for Kashmir

What is the issue?

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- Northern Ireland witnessed some of the messiest violence in the 20th Century.
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- With sustained peace having been restored for over 2 decades now, the Irish case presents a good model for Kashmir's future.
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What is the history of conflict in Ireland?

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- **Independence -** Ireland as a whole was a British colony from the Tudor conquest in the 17th century till the 1922 Anglo-Irish Treaty.
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- Under the treaty, the island of Ireland was divided into two territories namely "Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland".
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- While former became an independent nation, the later was to remain an autonomous region within the U.K.
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- Underlying this divide was a clear demographic divide between the English colonisers and the Gaelic Natives (people of the Irish lineage).
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- English settlers were predominantly Protestants and were concentrated in Northern Ireland and the natives were predominantly Catholics.
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- **Tensions -** Within the Northern Ireland, Catholics of Irish dissent, were a big minority and accounted for about 40% of the population.
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- Due to various forms of political polarisation in the society, demographic tensions were ranging in the Northern Ireland in the 1980s.
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- Violent riots and clashes between the government forces and dissenters were common in those years, resulting in numerous deaths.
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- The dissenters were called Irish nationalists and argued for integration of the “Northern Ireland” with the “Republic of Ireland”.
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- Contrarily, pro-government forces were called unionists who wanted to remain within the U.K. administration.
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How were the tensions resolved?

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- Eventually, sectarian politicians in Northern Ireland adopted the “greater autonomy” card over complete secession to negotiate with the U.K. authorities.
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- Finally, the “Good Friday Agreement” was reached in 1998 and while Northern Ireland remains a part of U.K. still, peace was restored, which still holds good.
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- Key to the peace process was the emergence of honest but clever brokers who understood the contradictions of the difficult process.
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- This crafty diplomacy piloted by British PM Tony Blair’s government went alongside strong grievances redressing mechanisms of the affected citizenry.
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How does Kashmir’s case read against Northern Ireland’s?

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- **Similarities -** Kashmiri conflict, like Northern Ireland's, is also rooted in ethno-religious context and both have seen numerous violent episodes.
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- In Kashmir's case, "Kashmiri Pundits" (Hindus) are pitted against "Islamic Extremists", much like the Catholic - Protestant divide in Northern Ireland.
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- Further, it was during strongly rooted cultural right wing regimes that sectarian tensions got fuelled more in these regions.
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- Much like the nationalists in Ireland, the Hurriyat leadership in India has been towing a secessionist line all along.
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- **Future -** While Northern Ireland saw the emergence of witty negotiators who were trusted by both sides, Kashmiri conflict awaits them.
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- But an international negotiator is likely to be an anathema to any Indian government for the fear of internationalising the issue.
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- In this context, there is a need for the emergence of a local hand that is trusted by all including the hardliner Hurriyat leadership.
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- While the Hurriyat demand is currently "independent Kashmir", talks might help in mellowing down the tenor to something like greater autonomy.
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What is the way ahead?

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- A close look at separatist movements shows that the problem is lesser about territorial control and more about a fight for self respect.
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- Interlocutors and diplomats piloting settlements should go into this aspect in detail if they are to address the roots of the problem.
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- In Kashmir's case, both Muslims and Hindus has been emotionally brutalised due to years of political polarisation and suppression.
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- Pakistan might want to play spoiler in any Indian effort to address the Kashmir issue, and only a strongly committed diplomacy can overcome

this.
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- While the masses in Northern Ireland continue to display polarised loyalties, violence has disappeared and expressions have taken softer conducive modes.
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Source: Indian Express

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