

Kashmir

Caught between the devil and the deep sea

ARJIMAND HUSSAIN TALIB in Srinagar

TALK to a common Kashmiri these days, you would find him extremely confused. When *Fidayeens* (suicide attackers) storm a security camp, one would find offices, public places colleges, schools abuzz with discussions glorifying the attacks and attackers. However on the day when a bomb blast would kill some civilians, the mood would be different.

The Kashmiri people, caught between the devil and the deep sea, are seen in a catastrophic dilemma. Their voice, on one hand, has been decimated amidst the deafening sounds of bullets and bombs and on the other by the Hindu nationalistic rhetoric and the pan-Islamic objective of unifying the Muslim *Ummah*.

Entangled between the champions of the ongoing movement, the Kashmiris seem to be wavering between their secular nationalistic feelings and the Islamic sentiments against the Hindu India. When the momentary lull in the political resistance to the Indian rule in Kashmir was shattered by a handful of youth in the late-'80s with the sound of Kalashnikov gun, a new and bloody chapter marked the volatile Kashmir politics. The overwhelming public support to the armed resistance movement initiated by a few youth soon turned into a popular uprising. Kashmiri youth cutting across all social strata joined the armed struggle and crossed the line of control to get arms training in Pak-administered Kashmir in a dream of a free Kashmir. And with that, started the bloodiest phase of Kashmir's political history.

Most people saw in that a violent reaction to the broken promises and the serious erosion of the autonomous status given to the State, under the 1952 Delhi agreement. Unnerved by the high level of the public resistance, the government of India responded by what could be described as one of the stiffest military methods to quell the resistance. Even as more than a decade has passed, the conflict goes on with far greater intensity.

Although the creation of the All Parties Hurriat Conference sought to give a political orientation to the movement in Kashmir and emerged as the

genuine voice of the popular mood in the valley, this 23-party conglomerate, thanks to the overwhelming power of the armed groups - has little authority to determine the political course of the ongoing crisis in the State.

The number of people, got killed in the last decade has now crossed over 70,000. Property worth hundreds of crores has been destroyed. Thousands have been rendered homeless and maimed. Scores of people continue languishing in jails. A majority of the Kashmiris, having been witness to the gory events, have developed severe kinds of psychological and psychiatric ailments. Public institutions have virtually collapsed. Every sphere of life in Kashmir is in a shambles. The entire society, struggling with the social odds having surfaced with the killing and disappearance of a large number of youth, is in total chaos. The average marriage age of girls has reached 32 years - thanks to the unavailability of 'suitable' boys. More than a decade down the line, there seems to be no end to the dark tunnel of death and destruction.

However, what signalled the departure from government of India's insistence that talks would be only held within the constitution of India, was the Premier Vajpayee's historical bus-ride to Pakistan. Thus as the Kashmir issue seemed to be heading to a compromised solution, guns began to boom on the Kargil hills.

Tom apart by the various dynamics of the political tempest, people today look for a way out. But they insist that a way out will have to restore their dignity and honour. They yearn for peace but at the same time are not ready for the restoration of the pre-'90s status. The November 28, 2000 unilateral ceasefire announced by the government of India has remained confined to papers. The situation on the ground has remained unchanged. Combat operations continue; selective killings of the people associated with the resistance movement, militarily or politically, continue unabated. Search and destroy operations go on. Where the ceasefire has made a difference is on the ceasefire line, where both the sides are exercising what is called 'restraint'.

The expectations of a meaningful outcome from the ceasefire initiative

have since died down. The government of India is being widely seen in Kashmir to have failed to follow up the ceasefire announcement with concrete measures. The recent step of appointing Mr. K. C. Pant as the sole negotiator is being widely seen as wastage of time. As the government of India was expected to allow the APHC team to visit Pakistan, so that they could prevail upon the militant leadership there to announce a ceasefire, and initiate talks with the relevant political players in the State, the government of India invited what APHC calls a 'crowd', whose voice has no relevance in the present circumstances'.

As these lines are being written, the APHC is all set to reject the talks offer. The general viewpoint held in the recent general council meeting has been that the government of India actually does not want any solution to the Kashmir problem. People see in the latest initiative a ploy to undermine the representative character of the APHC. But how long would the stalemate continue? For an independent observer of the political events in Kashmir, there is hardly any hope for peace.

Kashmir has, sadly, become a battle ground for various civilisational clashes. The pro-independence groups have lost their military might. Although a vast majority of the Kashmiris favours Kashmir's independence, the pro-independence groups have lost considerable ground to the pan-Islamic militant groups. Although they would like a gradual process of political change leading to Kashmir's unification and independence, but the military might of the pro-Pakistani forces is too big to allow any headway on that. Not only the forces, the government of Pakistan does not see Kashmir's independence as the actual solution to the issue. That has been proved by the Kargil operation.

The radical Islamic groups spearheading the present armed campaign seem to be in high spirits. Contrary to popular belief of their defeat at Kargil, they boast of a big victory. Citing the high human and material costs that India is bearing to man that inhospitable territory, they term the operation a success of their long-term 'bled India policy'. The Jehadi groups are determined to fight till India leaves Kashmir.

Their increasing strength and the fledging trans-national influence

seem to have insulated them from any possible Pakistan government action to contain their activities. At the same time, with some successful suicide operations, they seem to have rendered a severe blow on the security of the Indian military establishments in the State. Although Indian troops control the Srinagar city, militants continue with their operations at ease. The countryside is virtually in the control of the militants. Although some individuals within the Hurriat Conference were inclined for a talk with Mr. Pant, the overwhelming voice of the hardliners has finally prevailed. The so-called peace talks are going to be a non-starter.

Alterall, talking to the Ladakh Buddhist Association or Kargil Shia Association or any other pro-India group cannot help restore peace in any way in the State, many argue. Meanwhile, the rise of the Hindu fundamentalist forces in India and their campaigns are seeing the emergence of reactionary campaigns in Kashmir too. Amidst this battle of wits, Kashmir continues to bleed. The daily statistical account of the number of people killed and injured has assumed a mere statistical importance for the media in both India and Pakistan. As Kashmir is increasingly being made an issue of survival for the millions of people of the subcontinent, Kashmir continues to burn.

The intelligentsia of both India and Pakistan, though initiated the track-II mode of peace diplomacy, the religious and political rhetoric in both the countries seems to be too great to allow such fringe activities to flounder. Perhaps, it would be a mad fight till the human existence would be wiped out from the entire South Asia. The neutrons in action of our nuclear bombs and the situation on ground in Kashmir suggest the same.

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Cultural cooperation can go a long way

ALI AHMED

IT is a fact recognised the world over that South Asia comprising roughly the countries of the SAARC region is an area of the globe, stricken by poverty of a magnitude comparable only to that of sub-Saharan Africa. But the great difference is that in the former a vastly larger number of people are trapped in poverty than in the latter.

While history provides a lot of parallels in the course of its otherwise unforeseeable traverse in time, it also sometimes throws up quite a few twists and turns very unique in themselves, challenging human ingenuity, often to its farthest limits, to adept to those situations. The history of South Asia, especially that of the sub-continent proper, threw up one such turn in its path challenging generations after generations of its inhabitants to live with it.

Paganism in Europe beat quite a fast retreat, never to return again, before the advancing waves of Christianity, although the continent later witnessed a split in the religion with horrendous barbarity in its name on both sides of the divide. The American and many other parts of the globe saw the victory of Christianity as the Middle-East witnessed the rise of Islam supplanting Paganism, Christianity and Judaism. India, with its very old and rich civilization, later to be termed as Hinduism, witnessed a brief historical period of a sway of Buddhism, only to be swamped back by Hinduism again, thus averting once and for all possible future conflicts between these two great religions. Similar has been the fate of Islam in the Iberian Peninsula, where Islam as a religion was virtually wiped off allowing the region to be a uni-religious swath of the globe. But the history of the sub-continent took a different turn with the coming in of Islam in the 8th century. Although in its first flash Islam swept away all other religions in the Middle East and a very large chunk of Africa, and even its far later and comparatively weakened waves swept far-away countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, it could not conquer the Indian sub-continent. Nor could it be swamped back by Hinduism as the latter did to Buddhism and, as stated earlier, Christianity did to Islam on the Iberian Peninsula. It is true that Islam in the sub-continent remains a minority religion, but even this minority is so vast that they feel strong enough to challenge the majority almost in all fields. And the vast majority of Hindus with a very rich cultural tradition are not expected to budge to 'outsiders' on their home ground. And in this lies the root of almost all the problems of the modern-day South Asia.

The peace-loving people in the countries of the SAARC region with the welfare of their people in mind must act now, and act in right ear-

nest, if they do not want to see before their very eyes the rich potential of socio-economic development of their people fritter away into nothingness. It is understandable that the perceived historical enmity and the conflict of religions among the major groups and countries of the region cannot be wished away overnight. But a beginning, however tremulous may it be to start with, has to be made to fight the evil forces of obscurantism and militarism, and present before the people the alternative to this in the form of peace and prosperity for all of them.

As stated earlier, cooperation, and not confrontation, can really bring about welfare of all. But with centuries-old misunderstanding

of misunderstanding and distrust, providing a happy glimpse of the inner self of the 'other' fostering friendship and understanding. But if this cooperation dwindles into a one-way traffic from the most powerful to the weaker states, the cooperation would in no time be interpreted as a domination, and would therefore be counter-productive. A careful and meticulous planning must therefore precede the contemplated cultural cooperation among the countries of the region if we want it to be truly productive and beneficial.

Although cultural exchanges among the countries of the region in the form of music, dances and painting can greatly foster appreciation one another's heritage, a true understanding of the people can be brought about through the study and understanding of each other's literature and visual media. Arrangements may therefore be made for a wide variety of exchanges in those fields with translations and sub-titles, where necessary. But it needs re-emphasising that this must be multi-track and multi-directional transaction among these countries, or else the whole efforts will be interpreted as a cultural domination engendering resistance. The results will simply be counterproductive.

The SAARC writers' conference may provide the nucleus of such a mutual and cooperative exchange in the field. The SAARC Secretariat with its already existing institutional framework may easily expand its activities in the area of cultural cooperation among its member countries encouraging fostering and even funding cultural exchanges among members. A translation bureau may also be established within the Secretariat framework to undertake inter-lingual translation of renowned works in the fields of literature of its member countries. This, we hope, will pave the way for a new era of cooperation leading ultimately to enhancement in general welfare of all the people of the region.

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Bangladesh

The road to polls

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THIS is the election year for Bangladesh and the polls are not far away constitutionally, if not round the corner. After a long acrimonious duel over the holding of the elections between the government and the mainstream opposition, the contending parties now seem to have settled for the voting which look probable in October this year. However, the timing can be advanced or also delayed depending on the circumstances; but as of now October appears to be the month for balloting and preparations are continuing in that direction.

PM Sheikh Hasina, the chief of the ruling Awami League government, is now seeking votes for her party highlighting the need for a second term. Main opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia, the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has also thrown her hat into the ring of electioneering. She sought votes for during a rally at the Sylhet the other day. The political forces including three factions of the Jatiya Party (Ershad), JP (Mizan-Manju) and JP (Matin-Najjur) are also in the election fray and trying to evolve their strategy in the form of tying alliances or whether to go alone in the coming polls. But it is somewhat little early to reach a final strategy to find allies since these factions are still confused about their positions and consequently, polarisation is expected in the coming days.

The 11-party Left alliance is clamouring for freeing the elections from the influence of black money, illegal arms and muscle power while they are also slowing taking preparations for the voting. The Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic parties are also busy, looking for nominees in the polls, as they are mostly grouped in the four-party opposition alliance led by the BNP. Undoubtedly, the road to election will only be hectic and enlivened when the dates for the polls are announced but all the signs are

there. In a democracy, importance of people's mandate is of supreme significance because the 'right to good governance' stems from the outcome of the balloting.

But is there still any question mark on holding of the polls? Frankly, some quarters are sceptical even at this stage on elections taking place on scheduled time. They have different reasons and analyses, but these interpretations notwithstanding, most people are inclined to believe that there is no option but polls in the coming months. Barring totally unforeseen developments, polls are to take place as per provisions of the constitution and rightly, the nation is eagerly looking forward to the big event.

Basically, next elections will throw up certain major issues like whether the ruling party will be able to retain power or the opposition succeeds in capturing the right to rule the country and if so, in what form - by an alliance? What could be the post-election scenario is also a matter of concern of the people. There are a lot of speculations on the duty and obligations of the caretaker government which is supposed to take over the reins for a period of three months with the objective of conducting free and fair polls after the present government relinquishes power at the end of its term. The incumbent authority's tenure expires on July 13 this year, although the government was formed on June 23 which marks five years in power by the present gov-

ernment. Technically, the government can remain in power till the first day of the meeting of the new parliament which is July 13, 2001.

Although several government party leaders have made it clear that they would remain in power till the last day provided by the constitution, there is also an impression that the PM may quit on or just after June 23. She had had announced this during her Hajj this year that she would quit anytime after April 17 so that the polls could be held by June 12. The opposition charges that the PM was not at all sincere about her "Medina declaration". The government time and again said that the constitutionally formed legal authority cannot be browbeaten and removed from power by sheer agitations on the streets. The government has a strong point here because it should not be pulled down by unconstitutional methods. As such, it is no wonder that the opposition finally seems to have abandoned the idea of forcing the government out of power and have now turned to the elections. This is good for all and it is time that everyone strove for a free and fair voting which, however, remains somewhat uncertain. An impartial election is the need of the hour for the sake of democracy. A litmus test lies ahead in this regard for the caretaker government and the Election Commission. They have an onerous responsibility.

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