

Siachen conflict and South Asia's ecological doom

EKRAM KABIR

The Indian army recently said any agreement with Pakistan on demarcation of Siachen glacier should be on the present control. The army's northern command, Lt Gen H.S. Panag, was quoted as saying at command headquarters in Udhampur that Pakistan does not have any edge in Siachen and that the Indians are capable of guarding it. They say that they have bettered their security set-up in Siachen.

This statement of Panag goes against all attempts for resolving the crisis between India and Pakistan in Siachen, especially on its glaciers.

On the other hand, Pakistan has ruled out authentication of troop positions in Siachen, rejecting India's condition for resolution of the issue. An Indian foreign ministry statement said that Islamabad would have to authenticate the Actual Ground Position Line in Siachen before any forward movement could be made to settle the issue.

Although Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had proposed two years ago that the icy heights of Siachen be demilitarized and converted into a "mountain of peace"; it doesn't seem that the militaries of the two countries would give in so easily.

In the meantime, the glaciers of Siachen melt due to the military presence there.

Wild rose withers away

"The climate of Siachen is severe, still the word 'Siachen' ironically means 'the place of wild roses', a reference some people attribute to the abundance of Himalayan wildflowers found in the valleys below the glacier," says Arshad H. Abbasi, hydrologist and former advisor to the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), a policy oriented, research institute based in Islamabad.

The Siachen glacier, the largest Himalayan glacier, belongs to Karakoram glaciers of western Himalayas. The Siachen glacier is

located in the eastern Karakoram Range in the mountains of Ladakh, at approximately 35.5° N 77.0° E.

Before the military intervention, it was the longest glacier of the world's non-polar areas.

It ranges from an altitude of 18,875 ft above sea level at its source at Indira Col (pass) on the China border to its snout at 11,680 feet. The glacier's melting waters are the main source of Nubra river, which drains into the Shyok. The Shyok in turn joins the Indus. Prior to 1984, neither India nor Pakistan had any permanent presence in the area. However, since 13 April 1984, the glacier has become the highest battleground on earth where India and Pakistan have fought intermittently due to the improperly demarcated territory on the map beyond the map coordinate known as NJ9842.

Military presence made the worst impact at Siachen, resulting in the melting of glacier at an unprecedented rate. "The Siachen glacier used to be 82 kilometers long. [It] is now retreated and its length is hardly 72 kilometers. To sustain the position over Siachen glacier, both countries are developing permanent infrastructure, particularly the Indian army constructed a state-of-the-art airport road for better physical approach at Siachen glacier," says Abbasi.

Construction of Dehli-Manahli-Leh road, The Leh, nearest town to Siachen is connected by road from Delhi via Manali and by intersecting various Himalayan glaciers and believed to be the world's highest road. The Siachen to Delhi connection by road crosses world's highest passes and was opened to motor vehicles in 1988 maintained by the Indian army. The road is, no doubt, strategically important to India as it is used to carry essential supplies to Siachen. Construction of Thoise to support army troops deployed at Siachen glacier, where now daily jet flights land from various corners of India simply brings death sentence for almost all the Himalayan glaciers.



"The Himalayan zone is the climate regulator and also water head of the Indian subcontinent. The role of Himalaya is not only 'starter' and 'regulating area' for the climate of the Eastern Hemisphere as a whole but also 'source of rivers' and the 'ecological source' for South and Southeast Asia," Abbasi points out.

The Himalaya and Tibetan Plateau is the water head of rivers that flow down to half of humanity as almost 75 per cent of the runoff in three major river systems; the Brahmaputra, Ganges and Indus occurs between June and September, in response to the snow and glacier ice-melt accumulated in Himalaya.

The glacier covers in the Himalayas, amounting to 34,660 (km²) behave like natural reservoirs. During the last twenty years or so, continuous human intervention in the form of war, mountainering, and uneven development

in most parts of this fragile zone of the globe is unquestionable proof that global warming is caused by human activity, and not by natural environmental factors that is not only likely to impact water resources in regions but also will threaten the future of climate of South Asia.

Demise of the heavens

Though IPCC in 2007 warned the decision-makers, strongly saying that if concrete steps were not taken to check the unprecedented melting of Himalayan glaciers then there was great likelihood of decline in water availability when needed along with highest degree of vulnerability of coastal populations due to rise in sea level. The IPCC report warns that the projected sea level rise could flood the residence of millions of people living in the low lying areas of Bangladesh.

Melting of Himalayan glaciers along with other extreme climatic

incidents such as high intensity rainfalls have made Bangladesh highly vulnerable to floods. Fluctuation in flow of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers is continuously increasing, causing floods in Bangladesh. In 1987, 1988 and 1998, Bangladesh experienced three extreme floods due to climatic viabilities that left trails of devastation and human misery. These floods caused very serious damage to Bangladesh economy. Controlling highly fluctuating flow by any engineering structure is beyond its control as more than 90 per cent of Bangladesh rivers originate outside the country. Planning to mitigate sea level rise or flooding is difficult without neighboring countries' cooperation.

Although, the world is called a "global village" now, Pakistan and India, having the largest concentration of glaciers outside the Polar Regions, did not realize their global responsibility of saving this

global heritage. Although it is reported that Himalayan glaciers are shrinking since last 30 years due to multifarious reason, both countries still refrain from taking any concrete step to check their melting including demilitarization from Siachen glacier, which is one of the fundamental cause of melting of other Himalayan glaciers.

Although warnings were issued by various international organizations that melting of Himalayan glaciers could cause intense flooding as mountain lakes overflow with water from melting glaciers and snowfields, both the governments ignored these advices, saying that territory value of land is more than glacial ice.

The flood and other extreme climate events' warning are based on three years of research of UNEP and extensive research by WWF Pakistan. Moreover, the scientists assessed the conditions of about 4,000 glaciers and 5,000 glacial ice and they could burst

their seams in the next five years.

Although global warming had been attributed to melting of Himalayan glacier, amazingly, western glaciers located in Pakistan remained stable and growing. The reason is very simple - these glaciers are free from any human intervention. The independent studies conducted by Italians published in 2006 and the University of Newcastle UK in December 2005, are the best proofs of this. The reason for growing of glaciers in Pakistan's western side is perhaps simple. These glaciers are still free of human intervention and thus provide perfect proof to reject that global warming is the only cause of melting of Himalayan glacier.

Scientists declared that Himalayan glaciers are climate regulators of the region; both governments are yet to move toward demilitarization of the world's longest glacier, the cause of melting of Siachen and other Himalayan glaciers. It is high time to make both India and Pakistan realize that Himalayan glaciers are global assets and their value is more than a territory and its stakeholders are whole South Asia and the globe at large. Unfortunately, there is no pressure from other South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, which suffered the tsunami in 2004. In Post tsunami 2004 reports published in late 2006, it was categorically recommended to check glaciers from melting to save planet from devastating tsunamis and hurricanes in future.

Perhaps new warning of IPCC may help to solve this serious issue to mitigate existing and impending environmental, human and economic disasters as both countries are taking only strategic importance of the whole 1000 Square kilometer area of Siachen.

The Himalayan glaciers are not only the source of all rivers, they are also the source of the ecological life of the whole region. It has been scientifically proven that they are the climate regulator of India, Pakistan, China and the Far East.

Unfortunately over the last 30 years, the Himalayan glaciers are retreating and melting at a greater rate. This is not because of global warming alone, but basically because of human intervention. The example is Siachen glaciers. Siachen glaciers are called the third pole of the globe. Over the last 23 years, Pakistan and India have deployed their troops and fought over Siachen glaciers without any result. We have even studied the casualty rate. Surprisingly, 97 per cent of the casualties are due to the weather, not because of the war. Since 2003, there has been a treaty, but the casualty rate is the same. The route that both these countries are taking to reach food for their troops is damaging other Himalayan glaciers. According to their report, the eastern Punjab, the food basket of India, will become a desert. The reason is the depleting glaciers.

Melting of glaciers is not the issue for the SAARC region only; the sea level rise is also associated with this. The melting of Himalayan glaciers is contributing to sea level rise by 27 per cent. "So, Pakistan and India are not only destroying the environment of this region, but also the whole world," says Abbasi.

Still stubborn

The key question that must be asked is whether Siachen has major strategic significance that justifies prolonged occupation, or are the two nations fighting over an icy wasteland merely for jingoistic and chauvinistic reasons?

In his book "Siachen: Conflict Without End", Lt-Gen V R Raghavan (Retd) has written: "The [Siachen] theatre of conflict, as is now widely accepted, did not offer strategic advantages... It is clear that neither India nor Pakistan wished the Siachen conflict to assume its lasting and expensive dimensions."

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Is BJP reassessing the Muslim factor?

DR. ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

The recent defeat of BJP in U.P. elections has given it not only a great shock but also has made its leaders review its policies. Even the Brahmins, its traditional vote bank, deserted the BJP in U.P. Generally up to mid-eighties the Brahmins were voting for the Congress. The Congress used to win elections by getting votes of Brahmins, Muslims and Dalits. However, when the Muslims deserted the Congress in late eighties on the question of laying foundation stone of Ramjanambhoomi Temple, the Congress lost power and so Brahmins also deserted the Congress as there was no chance of its coming to power.

The Brahmins switched their loyalty to the BJP as it was raising the issue of Ramjanambhoomi and had much better chances of coming to power. The Brahmins continued to vote for BJP as long as it had potential to capture power either by itself or through suitable alliances. However, during the 2007 assembly elections in U.P. Ms. Mayawati was the rising star for number of reasons, one was her alliance with both Brahmins and Muslims.

Ms. Mayawati was following the well-tested Congress formula of Brahmin-Muslim-Dalit alliance to win the elections. She had solid Dalit base and had also convinced the Brahmins to vote for her. Not only this she had wooed the Thakurs also and was sure to get votes of a section of Thakurs too. The Brahmins weighed all this and deserted the BJP who had any way never fulfilled its promise to build Ram Temple. The BJP was, however, hoping against hope that Brahmins might vote for it but drew blank.

The BJP also tried to woo Hindus by not only its Ramjanambhoomi rhetoric but also by circulating anti-Muslim CD. It could not of course get away with anti-Muslim CD as the Election Commission took notice of it and stopped the BJP from using it. This was also a moral as well as a legal blow to the BJP. Having lost elections in its own den is serious setback to its senior leaders.

However, there is no easy way out for them. To revive itself in U.P. in the absence of any wave in its favour is a Herculean task. With 20 per cent Muslims of U.P. hostile to it and Brahmins also having deserted it, it is under pressure to change its virulent anti-Muslim course. But that is also not an easy task. The BJP senior leaders in Delhi nevertheless are thinking on these lines. A Mushaira (poetic gathering) at the home of BJP leader Shah Nawaz was organized and many BJP leaders participated in it. Many moderate BJP leaders also feel we have offered Muslim votes to

Congress and other parties on a platter by alienating them. We should woo them even at this stage.

Of course this will not be easy both from Sangh Parivar's as well as Muslim viewpoint. Sangh organizations like VHP and Bajrang Dal who are accusing BJP leaders of soft pedaling Hindutva agenda will vehemently oppose this change of course. Their very existence will be in danger. On the other hand, after years of anti-Muslim propaganda, it will not be easy to carry conviction with Muslims, let alone aspire for the sizeable Muslim

important event for Brahmins to become politically active again.

Thus, the coming together of Brahmins from entire country to support Dalit leadership is a matter of great concern for the BJP. If this pattern of Brahmin-Dalit-Muslim alliance emerges on all India, BJP will loose ground in other places too. After U.P. the BJP lost election in Goa also.

Surendra Kulkarni, media advisor to the then Prime Minister Shri. Vajpayee has been writing a series of articles in Indian Express

(Golwalkar) also maintained that "it is better that Muslims themselves reform their outdated laws and customs. I will be pleased if they come to the conclusion that polygamy is not good for them. But I would not like to impose my views on them."

Significantly Mr. Kulkarni says, in the same interview, Golwalkar warns: "Uniformity is a pointer to the downfall of nations. I am in favour of preservation of diverse ways of life. At the same time, we should pay attention to ensure that these diversities nurture unity of the nation."

agenda.

How can one then have constructive dialogue between RSS and Muslims or BJP and Muslims. Did RSS leadership say a word in condemnation of what happened in Gujarat in 2002? A word opposing the Gujarat carnage from RSS leadership would have won over the hearts of millions of Muslims. On the contrary Narendra Modi became an apple of RSS eye. He has always been considered an RSS man.

This is not to suggest that there should be no dialogue between

How about the textbooks taught in RSS run schools? Do they not spit venom against Muslims and grossly distort medieval history? If Golwalkar wanted people to be good Muslims and good Hindus, why was the Babri masjid demolished and the event celebrated? Was it being a good Hindu? Did RSS approve of it or not? Does RSS insist on Hindutva agenda or not? It often chides the BJP for not doing enough for fulfilling the Hindutva agenda. How can one then have constructive dialogue between RSS and Muslims or BJP and Muslims. Did RSS leadership say a word in condemnation of what happened in Gujarat in 2002? A word opposing the Gujarat carnage from RSS leadership would have won over the hearts of millions of Muslims. On the contrary Narendra Modi became an apple of RSS eye. He has always been considered an RSS man.

They want to, however, convince Muslims that it was Vajpayee who initiated the Indo-Pak friendship process and also took initiative for solving the Kashmir problem. How far it will convince Muslims is anybody's guess. The Congress could not win Muslims for number of reasons, one was her alliance with both Brahmins and Muslims.

It is very interesting to note that Mayawati, encouraged by her success in U.P. in getting Brahmin votes, is trying to woo Brahmins in other states too. The Brahmins are also elated by the U.P. experiment in as much as it has opened new doors for increasing their political influence by supporting the BSP. Recently the All India Brahmin Federation (AIBF) has decided to support the BSP in all future elections in its convention in Tirupati. It also wants to embark on a special mission to improve Brahmin-Dalit harmony. The Shankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peeth Swami Jayendra Saraswati is also scheduled to attend the convention.

Kotashankar Sharma, a Brahmin leader even commented that most of the communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims were due to the ignorance of and inability of the common man to see through the intrigues of vested interests. The AIBF conference is seen as an

suggesting that the BJP should woo Muslims to the mutual benefit of both. Mr. Kulkarni is even trying to prove that RSS has never been anti-Muslim and has been quoting from writings of Shri M.S. Golwalkar. In his column in Indian Express on 10th June 2007 he quotes Golwalkar from his interview given to Dr. Saifuddin Jeelani, an Arabic Scholar (Bunch of Thoughts, p-639) Golwalkar said, "According to our religious belief and philosophy, a Muslim is as good as a Hindu, it is not the Hindu alone who will reach the ultimate Godhead. Everyone has right to his path according to his own persuasion."

Kulkarni further informs us that specifically refuting the charge that the Sangh's concept of Indianisation meant Hinduisation of Muslims, Golwalkar observed, "Follow your own religion. The God of Islam, Christianity and Hinduism is the same and we are all His devotees. Give the people true knowledge of Islam. Give people true knowledge of Hinduism. Educate them to know that all religions teach men to be selfless, holy and pious..."

Kulkarni also quotes from Golwalkar to prove that Golwalkar did not support Uniform Civil Code; and was in favour of allowing Muslims to follow their Shari'ah law. He

Mr. Kulkarni therefore, is attempting to explore ways in which a fruitful BJP-Muslim and RSS-Muslim dialogue might start. One wishes Mr. Kulkarni all success. But he himself has been in journalism and a political analyst. Politics is not all about piety and noble sentiments, even if what Golwalkar said is true. Otherwise the RSS and BJP would not have been doing the things in their political propaganda that they have been doing.

I would like to ask Mr. Kulkarni that if M.S. Golwalkar was against Uniform Civil Code in early seventies why the BJP adopted it as its Hindutva agenda and still is on it? Did Mr. Advani not preach Hindutva agenda at his aggressive best throughout late eighties and nineties? Were RSS leaders not aware of this? Or was Hindutva agenda formulated without RSS consent?

How about the textbooks taught in RSS run schools? Do they not spit venom against Muslims and grossly distort medieval history? If Golwalkar wanted people to be good Hindus, why was the Babri masjid demolished and the event celebrated? Was it being a good Hindu? Did RSS approve of it or not? Does RSS insist on Hindutva agenda or not? It often chides the BJP for not doing enough for fulfilling the Hindutva

agenda. But if Shri Kulkarni is suggesting dialogue at the BJP leadership's instance in the changed circumstances, let him suggest where and how to begin. He must know that there is deep distrust between Muslims and Sangh Parivar and in the best of conditions it will take great deal of efforts to create even a semblance of trust. In any case even if there is possibility of any dialogue it is for the Sangh Parivar to take initiative and convince Muslims of a need for a dialogue. Writing such articles might be an exploratory process but much more substantial work needs to be done.

A good beginning could be an apology for demolition of the Babri Masjid and then an appeal to Muslims to come forward for a reasonable solution of the problem without hurting religious sentiments on either side. Such an eventuality seems nothing more than a distant dream for the present.

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Kabul on the brink of disaster?

SWAPNA KONA

The NATO has categorically stated that it views the Spring Offensive launched by the Taliban this year as a failure. However, this has led to the rise of an alarming phenomenon - growing insurgency in the Afghanistan's capital, Kabul. Earlier, the ISAF forces were fighting Taliban forces mostly in the south of the country. Guerrilla tactics and suicide attacks were being employed in Uruzgan, Helmand, Khost, and Paktia and Kandahar.

But the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan appears to have shifted tactics incorporating techniques used in the insurgency in Iraq. In addition to resorting to suicide bombs, the Taliban has begun burning schools and targeting local government employees. Worst hit was Kabul where, on 17 June, a suicide bomber blew up a police academy bus in Kabul killing 35 people and wounding 52. The Taliban has claimed responsibility for the attacks, further stating that the capital was the next main target of the Taliban.

In an interview with the BBC, Taliban spokesperson Zabiyullah Mujahed said, "It is true we are increasing our pressure on Kabul, because Kabul is the capital city and the foreign troops are concentrated there" (BBC News, 21 June 2007). Further, he points out that NATO troops were successful in infiltrating the Taliban ranks and had killed some of its most important leaders like Mullah Dadullah (killed by American troops in May 2007). This in turn has led to a spate of attacks and suicide bombings. This has come in addition to the heavy fighting in the south, making 2007 so far the bloodiest year since the Taliban was ousted in 2001.

The government and the foreign coalitions, however, seem unmoved by these developments, even going as far as claiming that the Taliban was losing support. Afghan Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak says, "At the moment you see the tides are turning in our favour, the Taliban have failed to materialize their so called spring offensive. But statistics beg to differ - 90 foreign troops have gone down so far this year and civilian casualties are numerous.

The Taliban strategy is moving away from its earlier emphasis on encircling and taking out an area from ISAF control. It is now concentrating on finding its way into Kabul and destroying the city from the inside. This tactic involves the use of suicide bombers and gunmen targeting civilians - as Zabiyullah claims, there is no dearth of people enlisting to blow themselves up in this battle. This tactic requires lesser fighters and gives the Taliban the advantage of unpredictability. It also takes away the edge that coalition troops have in using air power or other techniques as they are unable to fight within the city.

President Karzai is of the view that Taliban's renewed strategy is a result of its frustration at the development and effectiveness of the Afghan National Army. He suggests that earlier the Taliban had only the foreign troops to counter, but as Afghan police and army forces are gaining strength, the Taliban is losing