

*The Kashmir talks: Let the people in  
(Role for Kashmiries in Indo-Pak talks)*

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30-06-2001

A very real issue may lose a lot by being wrongly stated.

Its resolution may no longer look all that necessary or urgent. It may not even look like a legitimate issue in this form. Or the resolution of the issue as stated may not help much in resolving the real problem that remains unstated. It may some times even do harm to the real issue.

The matter of the involvement of the people of Kashmir in the India-Pakistan talks is a case in point. Both India and Pakistan have formulated it as the issue of participation of the Hurriyat Conference in the talks. Pakistan has done so because it thinks – and has openly said so – that the Hurriyat Conference is the true representative of Kashmiris. And India has done so because stating the issue that way makes it easier for India to dismiss the need of any representation for Kashmiris in the talks, since the Hurriyat Conference can easily be branded a surrogate for Pakistan, an image that leaders of the Hurriyat like Sheikh Abdul Aziz have done nothing to dispel by going around kissing the earth in Pakistan.

That India and Pakistan may have coincident interests in such a matter will cause no surprise to close observers of the Kashmir situation for the last twelve years. Pakistan has always preferred Islamic militancy in Kashmir over Kashmiri militancy (in the ethnic sense) since the former will help Pakistan get Kashmir. And India too has preferred the Islamisation of Kashmiri militancy since that way it can don the mantle of a brave secular State fighting fundamentalists. And it will not have to answer the very uncomfortable questions posed by Kashmiri nationalism, whether of the Sheikh Abdullah genre or the Yasin Malik genre.

It is not that the Hurriyat Conference is an irrelevant organization in Kashmir. Nor that it can be dismissed in the off-hand and arrogant way frequently affected by Farooq Abdullah. It has its sizable section of supporters, as indeed in general Islamic militancy in the valley has. Its meetings are widely attended and its calls to protest are widely heeded. Not all those who respond may be ideologically sympathetic to it, and yet they respond because the Hurriyat Conference has played a creditable role in agitating against human rights violations by the Indian armed forces in the valley. Its protests on human rights issues are of course tinged by its political and ideological stances, but while that may diminish the efficacy of its espousal of the human rights cause, it does not negate it altogether.

Yet the Hurriyat is not Kashmir. Much less is it Jammu & Kashmir. It arrogates to itself such a representative character with the peculiar argument that the presence of representatives of the pro-India sentiment is not necessary in the talks because they agree with India any way, and India can represent them as well as itself. By the same token, most of the constituents of the Hurriyat too need not be represented since they agree with the Pakistani view point and Pakistan can represent them as well as itself. Such a line of argument would imply that only those people who agree neither with India's view of the matter nor Pakistan's need be represented in the talks. This may not be altogether unfair or unrepresentative at least as far as the valley is concerned since by all indicators the majority view in the valley does not see eye to eye with either India or Pakistan. But even in that sense it may not be a fair solution in the rest of the State. That, however, is not the issue. The issue is that if talks are to be held about the fate of a territory, the people who live therein must be adequately represented in all their varied views. Its practical aspect is how such a representation may be achieved. But the more important practical obstacle is the unwillingness of the discussants to let the third – and real – party in.

Because India and Pakistan are evidently determined not to allow that. By letting the Hurriyat Conference project itself as the rejected representative they have structured a distorted and diminished formulation of the issue. And it is a formulation that allows the two countries to get away with their undemocratic attitude – the real estate dealer's mindset – towards Jammu & Kashmir.

The fear widely observable in that State – especially in the Valley – is that excluding them is a prelude to the warring neighbours dividing up the State, perhaps along the LOC, with Siachen converted into a *Yeti* reserve. In the Valley this possibility evokes strong emotions. And perhaps also in the Muzaffarabad division of Azad Kashmir on the other side, which is ethnically close if not identical, and emotionally integrated with the Valley. Though the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (of Amanullah Khan on the other side and Yasin Malik on this side) asserts that the whole of the old State of Jammu & Kashmir should be intact and given independence from both India and Pakistan, such a strong sense of one-ness is possibly no longer there all over that region. Kashmir, Muzaffarabad and probably also the Rajouri-Poonch part of India may resent division but the rest may not.

The point in saying this is not that some 'experts' who 'know' what the people think should divide up the State accordingly, but that the people with their varied views should be let into the talks before any final decision is taken. The modalities of this may not be easy to determine, but the principle should be unequivocally accepted.

(Published in Indian Express)