

The unsaid in Agra
(Will peace prevail in Kashmir?)

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Reams and reams will be written about the failed Agra summit, but at least in India one thing will remain unsaid.

That is that Pakistan is right when it says that the resolution of every problem between India and Pakistan is predicated on the resolution of the core issue: Kashmir. And therefore the talks should primarily be about Kashmir. No other issue outstanding between the two countries is really intractable. The most that India can say in support of its stand is that as we talk about culture, cricket and *qawwalis* the atmosphere will ease some what, making it that much easier to talk about Kashmir at the end. In the absence of the acknowledgement by India that Kashmir is the core issue and the main attention should be devoted to that, Pakistanis are bound to suspect – and legitimately – that India plans to use the talks to get its MFN status and its Iran pipeline, and forget about discussing Kashmir with Pakistan.

This is the way the ceasefire was seen too, if we will allow ourselves to recall recent events. Indians know only that when the Government of India offered unconditional ceasefire in Kashmir, the militant organizations, in particular the Lashkar-e-Toiba, rejected the offer outright and declared that they would continue with their armed struggle. Given the impression that the Lashkar is a fundamentalist outfit which does not believe in civilized processes such as negotiations – there is little doubt that the Lashkar is a fundamentalist outfit, but it would be most unintelligent to believe that such groups always prefer to shoot rather than talk – most people in our country felt vindicated in their self-righteous belief that talks and negotiations are meaningless in the face of the kind of ‘enemies’ India is dealing with in Kashmir. One need hold no brief for the Lashkar-e-Toiba, for all fundamentalists are repulsive, from the Bajrang Dal to the Lashkar, but it would be instructive to see how the average Kashmiri, who too has little love for fundamentalism, views the rejection of India’s ceasefire offer by the militants.

What would a ceasefire devoid of a thorough-going political process (for resolving the ‘Kashmir dispute’) entail, if accepted by the militants and Kashmiris in general? It would mean that the militants down their guns and India, while making appropriate noises off and on about resolving the issue politically, calmly reestablishes its firm control over Kashmir. For the Kashmiris it would mean that all the gains they have made in this decade of bloodshed – principally putting India on the defensive and forcing it to look the problem in the face – at the cost of tens of thousands of lives would go down the drain. From this point of view, most Kashmiris, including many who have little love for the social and political views of the *jehadi* militants, are in agreement with the militants in their rejection of India’s offer. But the moment India comes out

with a ceasefire which is truly a precursor of and a part of a thorough-going effort at resolving the issue by negotiations, the Kashmiris will, as one person, put the utmost pressure upon the militants to cooperate with the ceasefire and help arrive at a just the resolution of the issue. For they have no desire that the unending bloodshed should go on, since it is they who die on either side, and they also know that without genuine peace on the ground, no solution is possible.

I know that such talk will infuriate a lot of people, because it is predicated on the acceptance that Kashmir is disputed territory. As a matter of fact, India has at long last accepted now that it is disputed territory, for there is no other meaning in inviting Parvez Musharraf for talks. But doing things in a manner devoid of transparency and openness has the ill-effect that you end up doing it wrong. So in implicitly accepting that Kashmir is disputed territory, even as that idea is explicitly disavowed, India is now saying that it is disputed because Pakistan disputes it. Pakistan, ofcourse, disputes the accession of Jammu & Kashmir to India, but the more important fact is that the Kashmiris dispute it. Does India accept that too, post-Agra? It does not look like it for otherwise why is India so reluctant to involve Kashmiri representatives in the talks? Or to accept that it must be resolved to the satisfaction of the people of Kashmir?

Pakistan is of course happy. As a columnist of a Pakistani newspaper said caustically, 'Our (Pakistani) support to Kashmiri self-determination is a strange thing. It extends only to their freedom to join Pakistan, and not beyond'. In other words, when Pakistan says that the Kashmir issue should be determined in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir, it has in mind only two options for them: either they join India or they join Pakistan. The third option of independence is unacceptable to Pakistan. India, for its part, has not in the past recognized even the second option: the territory of Jammu & Kashmir is an integral part of India, irrespective of what the people who live there think.

Agra, it appears, signifies India's belated acceptance of the second option, though as yet in a muted fashion. But when will these two countries accept the third option? It is only when they do so and devise ways of letting the people of all regions of the State, on both sides of the LOC, exercise their various choices in the matter so that a comprehensive solution 'in accordance with the wishes of the people of the State' may be structured, can we expect to see peace – not the peace of the graveyard but an honourable peace – in the State, in particular the Valley of Kashmir.

One can take a bet that they did not discuss this at Agra.

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