

Is peace possible without trusting the people of Kashmir?
(Is peace possible without trusting the Kashmiris?)

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The seemingly opera-like quality of the ongoing Indo-Pakistan peace process has generated a skepticism in the public mind that has probably obscured some real changes emerging in the Kashmir situation.

No, the changes are not in the minds of Indian and Pakistani rulers. The real estate mindset is too single-minded to be capable of change. The change is in the slow but audible emergence of Kashmiri voices trying to speak for themselves. Of course, the tradition of Kashmiri nationalism – whose best known representative is Sheikh Abdullah, though there are many others, including some who are quite critical of him – has always struggled to express itself in a voice independent of the territorial aspirations of India and Pakistan. But what is significant is that even those Kashmiri political forces that have always sworn by the two nation theory, and continue to do so, are trying to assert themselves and say: Hands off Kashmir, everybody.

The first significant development in this direction is the difference of perception regarding the peace process between the Kashmiri militants represented mainly by the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, and the Pan-Islamic militants of the Jaish-e-Mohammad, the Lashkar-e-Toiba, the Jamiat-ul-Mujahideen, etc. The 'Hizb' is also a pro-Pakistan organisation, but it is composed mainly of Kashmiri youth, unlike the others, in particular the Lashkar-e-Toiba, whose cadre are mainly non-Kashmiri jihadis. Of course the Indian administration, including the J&K government, never acknowledged this difference in the past, as the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen acidly noted after the difference became perceptible and was welcomed by our rulers. Prior to that every dead militant was called a 'foreign mercenary'.

Not that the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen was united in its differences with the others. The disagreement between its presently Pakistan-based founder Syed Salahuddin and Abdul Majid Dar domiciled in India has been noted and commented upon by our newspaper columnists within the usual framework of cliques and conspiracies. This difference has been put down to tiredness on the part of the Kashmiri militants by our gleeful commentators, official and unofficial. If they are tired, the credit, if it can be called such, goes to our security forces and their friends the sponsored criminal gangs of ex-militants who have achieved this state of tiredness by the most brutal means. But there may be more to it than mere tiredness, brought about by whatever means. Those who are familiar with Kashmiri politics are aware that in Kashmir there has always been an undercurrent of resentment – in the religious as much as the secular circles – that their concerns have been appropriated by others for purposes not necessarily congruent with theirs. Kashmiris are often bemused by the number of issues India, Pakistan and the world at large have

annexed to their simple desire to live as they would like to and their unhappiness at not being given that choice.

The differences that have developed in the Jamaat-e-Islami of Kashmir are significant from this point of view. The executive of the Jamaat has openly come out criticising its former Amir, Syed Ali Shah Gilani, for saying that Kashmir is a religious issue. On the contrary, the Jamaat says, it is a political or politico-religious issue. These words signify a basic difference. Gilani's views are simple: Kashmiris are mostly muslims, and therefore their land should be in Pakistan according to the logic of the two-nation theory. There is no evidence that the present leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami of Kashmir have rejected the two nation theory. That they nevertheless call it a political and not a religious issue signifies some thing of moment: namely that while the 'Kashmir issue' is of real concern for all Kashmiris, the Jamaat's view of it is nevertheless not that of all the people of Kashmir, not even all the muslims among them, and that the Jamaat does not envisage the possibility of imposing its view on all of them with the aid of the guns of Lashkar-e-Toiba. Concomitant with this is the assertion of the present Amir of the Jamaat that the Kashmiri view should include also the concerns of the Hindus and Sikhs of Kashmir.

An even more significant statement made by them is that the Jamaat-e-Islami is not the political wing of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. This relation of political wing and armed wing between the two organisations had been accepted openly by both of them during all these years. It is explicitly rejected by the Jamaat today. That this ideological and political readjustment to the needs of a complex reality that will not brook any dogmatic assertion of the exclusive right to represent 'Kashmiris', nor a brutal faith in the gun as the final arbiter, is taking place within a hitherto hardline fundamentalist organisation within Kashmiri politics is to be contrasted with the child-like games our Sangh Parivar rulers are playing with the proclaimed first step of the process of dialogue: the visit of the Hurriyat leaders to Pakistan to consult the militant organisations and search out the modalities of talks.

This perhaps confirms one thing Kashmir-observers had always felt about Kashmiris: that they are among the more civilised of the ethnic/linguistic groups that constitute this subcontinent, and can be trusted to decide fairly for themselves – fairly as between the various viewpoints that divide them - if only they are allowed to do so. But this trust is what the rest of the subcontinent has never placed in them: India has prized the Valley as real estate but never trusted its people because about 95 percent of them are muslims; and Pakistan too has coveted the same real estate but trusted the people no more because their culture may not permit more than a minority of them to be the kind of muslims the Pakistani establishment would like all its citizens to be. There is a possibility that the Great Indo-Pakistan Peace Opera may enact itself out without any change in this matter.

The more is the pity.

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