

Visiting Jammu & Kashmir

Kashmir 18/4/09

Imtiaz Alam *in New*

Higher expectations, deeper suspicions, conflicting demands and overwhelming welcome underlined the first-ever visit of independent Pakistani journalists to Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir. For reporters in search of the other side of the story, to behave like diplomats while keeping in mind disparate positions of the antagonists was a journey through a minefield. Yet, the members of the delegation kept their cool and behaved the way they should have on a good will-cum-reporting mission to ensure that the window to access no-go areas, in this case across the LoC, is wide opened and not shut on their colleagues from both countries. Though South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) broke the barrier, has it helped the ongoing processes or became a victim of paranoia?

This was made clearer by the organisers (SAFMA chapters of Pakistan and India) that the journalists' exchange across the LoC was a part of their effort to allowing media persons freely move across frontiers and accessing information in South Asia. Carrying no briefs from anybody or any party nor becoming instrument of this or that partisan divide, SAFMA had set certain limits while knowing well that the journalists' delegation will come under tremendous pressure from all and too demanding sides, since it was to a territory under a bloody dispute between India and Pakistan and zealously possessed and, variously, claimed by the inhabitants of J&K. It became 'historic' since what should have been a very normal visit became 'abnormal' due to the fact that this was the first-ever journey undertaken by the Pakistani scribes in the last 57 years and against the backdrop of ongoing composite dialogue process.

No doubt, the visit would not have taken place without, thankfully, the clearance from India and Pakistan at the highest level and, indeed, this is what made the visit suspicious in the eyes of some conspiracy theorists or certain sick minds, who in fact suspect every move towards confidence building between India and Pakistan. The kind of reception and affection the delegation received from across all divides and regions was in fact a reflection of the longing the people feel for each other in the subcontinent, especially in J&K for Pakistan. Except for a very small section among the displaced Pandits, living in most miserable conditions in refugee camps in Jammu, accusing Pakistan of displacing them and those elements in Kashmir who consider negotiations between India and Pakistan as a death knell to their 'cause', the fraternity shown for the Pakistani delegation from Jammu to Kashmir was beyond our and their imagination. Even those who expressed reservations, for reasons SAFMA or the delegation could not be held responsible, in fact wanted the delegation to visit whole of Kashmir valley to assess the situation. Those who had decided not to receive the delegation also lined up behind the long queue.

Although there were no restraints on the media team to meet anybody anywhere, the visit was constrained by time and too tight a schedule prepared by SAFMA India and the coordinator, Editor *Kashmir Times* Mr Bhasin. The latter came under tremendous pressure for allowing the delegation to meet everybody

from the local media and all sections of society. Stay in Jammu, although without doubts and acrimony except seen at the Pandits' camps, was too ceremonious. What was quite disturbing to find was that after being displaced from the valley many among them had abandoned their secular paradigm of *Kashmiriat* and some among them have become communalised to the extent that they now demand carving a Pandit state out of the valley not many among the community agree with. The criticism about the neglect of their plight by the media in Pakistan was right to a point since it is focused on the valley and looked at Pandits with tinted glasses. Yet, there are nationalists, also among the Pandits, who differ with the tendency to treat the Kashmir question as a communal issue and insist on finding a way out of the quagmire of a cyclical violence.

The overwhelming view among the middle classes in Jammu takes 'accession to India' as a fait accompli, while the Punjabis and Dogras underline the need for greater room to allow reunion of the divided communities and are much more flexible on resolving the dispute. In fact their political, intellectual and business representatives show certain degrees of flexibility to bring peace to their troubled region and for greater gains the former J&K state can reap from a rapprochement between India and Pakistan. Their major demand was to open Jammu-Sialkot route and allow free movement of people. The secular view dominant among the urban people of Jammu, many among them don't like to be called Kashmiris, preclude any division on the basis of religion and feel at greater ease with Indian secular ethos. The nationalists, however, demand an untied and secular J&K that will be relatively independent of both India and Pakistan without being fully sovereign. And there are those 'nationalists' who would want a reunited J&K integrated with India, given the level of assimilation that has already taken place.

By contrast, the journey to and through Srinagar brought too much pressure on the delegation due to an awesome deployment of security forces, inflated demands of the Kashmiris and high passions of a people under siege for too long. The two meetings that we had on our way to Srinagar showed an area overburdened with the crossfire of security agencies and the militants. The people were living under visible harassment and intimidation. Srinagar wore the look of a capital scrawling on its knees under the burden of both insurgency and counter-insurgency, especially the heavy boots of security agencies, while giving the false image of the summer capital of a state that is supposed to 'enjoy' a special status - in fact in reverse. The passions, expectations and demands were too high, as we met a large number of leaders, students, lawyers, journalists, shopkeepers, men on the street, political activists, wailing women searching for their sons and rank and file of most of the parties.

Regardless of what the parties from the opposite or the same camps say, and there are too many, the people of Srinagar from almost all walks of life know to spell one word with close to total unanimity and that is: *Azadi* (freedom/independence). The alienation from New Delhi is complete and, perhaps, irreversible. More than 90 per cent of the public opinion is tilted towards independence. Even

those who raise the slogan of accession to Pakistan and also *Nizam-e-Mustafa*, although declining in numbers, subscribe to the idea of independence. Alienation from India does not mean that the Kashmiris want to join Pakistan. Yet the expectations from Pakistan are so high that even a non-official and private visit by the Pakistani journalists on Indian visa came under critical scrutiny, including those who practice Indian law or demand Indian passport to travel abroad. Suspicions about and complaints against Islamabad are on the rise after the division of All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC). On the issue of opening Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route, even those who oppose it cannot afford the reaction from the people who are craving to meet their own on the other side.

The target of resentment are the Indian security forces against whose excesses and human rights violations the system of justice has failed to provide any relief. Even the most moderate daughter of Chief Minister Mufti Sayeed, Mehbooba Mufti, who has come to the rescue of many aggrieved families, feel helpless and seeks refuge behind the excuses a heartless administration provides to hide its crimes. It does not mean that the people are not getting irritated with the excesses committed by the militants. So overwhelming is the support for *Azadi* that even the senior rank and file of National Conference of Abdullah, People's Democratic Party of Mufti and the Kashmir unit of Congress feel sympathetic to the aspirations of their Kashmiri brethren. The leadership of these parties exhibits a lot of flexibility, despite their capitulation, on possible peaceful solutions while supporting softening of the LoC and opposing militancy. Although Hurriyat is divided, and the Ansari faction accuses Islamabad for the division and Geelani faction blames them of hobnobbing with New Delhi, it can still play a crucial role if reunited and the militant groups took the back seat.

There are two broad views on the course to resolve the conflict: The one who believes that Indo-Pak dialogue will damage the Kashmir cause and any kind of confidence building between the two will be at the cost of Kashmiris. The other view considers Indo-Pak reconciliation process suitable to Kashmiris, if their representatives are engaged to decide their destiny. Almost every section of opinion in Srinagar emphasised the urgency to include Kashmiri representatives in the talks and want the composite dialogue to succeed. About representation the Kashmiri leadership has no problem in showing magnanimity or presenting a foolproof electoral course. The real issue is that both Islamabad and New Delhi stop treating the Kashmir issue as a territorial dispute and, instead, address together the aspirations of the people of the valley in some appropriate form that is to the satisfaction of the two big brothers. The solution lies in the process, not in any pre-determined formula. Can New Delhi and Islamabad dare to get out of their straitjackets and free the Indian and Pakistani minds from remaining a hostage to annexationist or irredentist view over Kashmir and take this hurdle out of the way of greater cooperation? The problem is not with the Kashmiris, it is with us. Who are we, the Indians and Pakistanis, to decide their destiny?

The writer is a staff member
imtiazalampak@yahoo.com