

Don't take the Kashmiris for a ride

By Bharat Bhushan

Amid the flurry of Indo-Pak talks, the people of Kashmir have unfortunately been reduced to mere passive receivers of decisions taken by Islamabad and New Delhi

PRIME Minister Manmohan Singh deserves credit for three initiatives that will go a long way in bringing down the temperature in India-Pakistan relations: doing away with passports for travel between the two parts of Jammu and Kashmir; inviting General Pervez Musharraf to watch the one-day match between India and Pakistan in New Delhi; and going ahead with the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline.

The visit of General Musharraf's mother, brother and son to India has preceded his own visit by nearly a month. They received an enthusiastic welcome not only in Delhi but also in Aligarh and Lucknow. This week, the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam), Chaudhary Shujat Hussain, will rub shoulders with the Indian leadership.

These visits are not accidental. At one level, they are indicative of the growing civility between the ruling elites of the two countries. However, this bonhomie is also fuelled by the will of the Indian and Pakistani people to get to know each other anew and explore their commonalities.

The most visible impact of normalising the relationship with Pakistan is likely to be seen in Jammu and Kashmir. Each step that India and Pakistan take towards friendship marginalises the extremist sentiment in Kashmir. That is why General Musharraf, his family and those of other Pakistani leaders ought to be invited to visit India more often; greater interaction should be promoted between the two Kashmirs, and speaking of politics in economic terms, "Kashmir-free solutions" — to borrow a phrase from Pakistan's prime minister, Shaukat Aziz — should be encouraged.

However, Kashmir and the Kashmiris ought not to be marginalised in this process. Indeed, the cardinal mistake that both India and Pakistan are making is of not taking the Kashmiris along with them.

Kashmiri leaders like Yasin Malik are right when they say that New Delhi and Islamabad are not selling their ideas effectively to the Kashmiris. Why were the Kashmiris not allowed the ownership of the idea of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service, he asks? Seminars and discussions on the proposed opening of the bus route could have been organised in Jammu and Kashmir involving Kashmiris from all walks of life. If the Kashmiris cannot be given azadi, at least they can be given the ownership of important confidence-building measures.

It is evident that the Kashmiris have been reduced to being passive receivers of decisions taken by Islamabad and New Delhi. Today, at best, they seem to be only collateral beneficiaries of the bargaining going on between India and Pakistan.

If the Manmohan Singh government can be faulted on its Kashmir policy, it is in confusing the "problem of Kashmir" for the "problem in Kashmir". The problem in Kashmir — of an internal conflict, of human rights violations, of youngsters languishing in prison and the lack of an adequately open space for politics — will not get resolved by increasing the frequency of bus services to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. For this there has to be dialogue with the people in Indian Kashmir.

There was a time when New Delhi was obsessed with a dialogue with the All-Party Hurriyat Conference. Ever since their leaders refused to meet Manmohan Singh when he visited the valley — no doubt partly because of the fear of Pakistan — New Delhi seems to have given up on them. On the rebound, our leaders in New Delhi hesitate to meet even Yasin Malik, who only wants to hand over the 15 lakh signatures he has col-

lected demanding a voice for the Kashmiris in the India-Pakistan peace process.

It is New Delhi's declared policy to offer talks to anyone who gives up violence. What could be more non-violent than Yasin Malik's signature campaign? Yet he is unlikely to get an appointment with the prime minister. However, if General Musharraf meets him in Delhi or the Pakistan high commission receives the signatures on his behalf, we will immediately dub him a Pakistani agent.

The only confidence-building measure that has gone overwhelmingly in favour of the Kashmiris up to now is the ceasefire. An end to violence by the two sides can give the people of Jammu and Kashmir the breathing space they desperately need. This also implies Pakistan pull its hand entirely from the violence it encourages within the state. Unless Kashmiris are given a right to life, and fear is taken away from their daily existence, how can they be expected to make up their mind? Their right to life must take priority over their right to self-determination.

If Pakistan is to understand this, then its establishment must give up its double standards on violence. A moderate Kashmiri friend recently posed the question succinctly: "When civilians are killed in Wana, Pakistan calls it a war against terrorism but when grenades are thrown in Kashmir, why is it called jihad? When elections are held in Muzaffarabad, they are considered good, but why are they evil if they are held in Kashmir?"

The fact is that Islamabad does not know the reality of Kashmir today. Its channels of information and communication are blocked — its sources are those who are involved in the conflict enterprise. Islamabad talks to only those who speak the language it likes to hear. The result is that it ends up believing its own propaganda.

General Musharraf is eager to address the Kashmir issue. He has even shown a readiness to be innovative. However, he has a habit of putting the cart before the horse — a number of solutions are put forward while ignoring the people. Has he consulted the Kashmiris about his seven-region proposal or any other proposal he might have up his sleeve? How does he have a greater right to speak about the future of the Kashmiri people than the Kashmiris themselves?

Perhaps General Musharraf needs to think less as a military planner and more as a statesman. Were he to do so, he may find that it is more productive to focus on people rather than on map-making exercises. A people-centric approach, in the short run, would entail building interdependence between the two Kashmirs; jointly addressing with India the issue of lack of investment in the two Kashmirs; promoting not only bus traffic but also goods traffic between the two regions.

In the long term, this would have to be backed by a commitment to complete peace in the region. It is quite likely that the Kashmir issue would become more amenable to a solution if it is made less important and separated from both Indian and Pakistani nationalisms. Only when this happens can the people of Kashmir be de-linked from the negativities emanating from Indian and Pakistani nationalism.

The political unity of the two Kashmirs does not seem possible as of now. The least India and Pakistan can do is to help forge a psychological unity between the Kashmiris so that they can heal themselves. General Musharraf will do a great service to the Kashmiris if he does not focus on pulling yet another rabbit out of his hat in terms of a new Kashmir solution when he is in Delhi. He will do well to concentrate on creating a more secure Kashmir — without fear from terrorists inspired by Islamabad or from the Indian security forces. It is in this endeavour that he should seek India's cooperation. COURTESY TELEGRAPH INDIA