

# Beyond the bus journey

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A DECISION creates a moment. A moment creates an opportunity, and history rides on the wheels of opportunity. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Pervez Musharraf created such a moment with the bus between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, and around it lie a range of opportunities and options that will shape the dialectic as well as the content of the India-Pakistan relationship. Significantly, opportunity could also lie outside the known script.

In that sense, April 6 could prove to be as significant as April 7. On the eve of the first bus to Muzaffarabad, militants attempted to sabotage the journey by the most brutal means conceivable — by killing all the passengers. This was in line with their threat to convert the bus into a coffin. One would have thought that this, at the very least, would have ensured better security in Srinagar.

Mercifully, the passengers survived both the inept security and the trauma of the attack. Remarkably, not a single passenger changed his or her mind about the journey. The extraordinary emotional scenes when the buses reached their destinations, and the courage of the drivers and passengers, proved beyond doubt how far the militants have moved from the sentiment on the ground.

Those who believed that terrorism would succeed clearly did not think through the consequences. Their guns were trained on ordinary Kashmiris, the very people they were seeking to "liberate". Death must seem like a strange form of liberation. These passengers were not "Indian agents" or parti-

## NOTES FROM DELHI

By M.J. Akbar

whether 18 people a day were going to bring eternal peace. I had to point out that 18 is an infinite number of time greater than zero. Indian television got hyper in its coverage of the attack, with some querulous microphone-holders virtually demanding that the bus be postponed if not scrapped. So what? Television is in the business of building ratings, not in the business of building peace.

The great question since January 1, 1949, the day a ceasefire line froze through Jammu and Kashmir, is whether this Line of Control has been drawn in stone or sand. It might seem unfashionably sentimental to say this, but I believe the tears of the Kashmiri people turned stone into sand. Dr Singh, Mrs Sonia Gandhi, General Musharraf and

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guage and share the same culture will rediscover a shared economy, a shared literature and a shared life. There has been a minor Punjab Olympics that generated great enthusiasm earlier this year.

A few weeks ago, thousands of Pakistanis came to Chandigarh to watch cricket and stayed to witness the future when thousands of Indians opened their homes to them. Independent nations must not punish their people and sentence them to life in a national prison. It was said once that while a British fort was meant to keep people out, Shah Jehan's Red Fort was built to bring people in. That is the difference that confidence, or absence of it, makes.

Is it possible that I am reading too much into a bus journey? That is certainly possible. Has my wish for peace edged out the considerations of realpolitik and the power of saboteurs from this assessment? Again, I cannot rule that out. I know I am on the "weaker" side. War is a swooping hawk. The words and associations that go with conflict are "tough" and "masculine" and

"hardheaded" and "realistic" and, most artfully, "patriotic". Peace is a fluttering dove, vulnerable to a brat's stone, let alone the batteries of firepower.

Peace is idealistic and therefore considered woolly-fuzzy. Peace does not march to the cadence of a martial band. Peace is a happy crowd thronging a bazaar rather than disciplined ranks in step with a heavy drum. Peace is feminine, and dismissed as weak; a pool of goodwill (never considered good enough) rather than a raging torrent distributing both positive and negative energy. Peace is limp, conflict is muscular. Nations are governed by hard heads, not trembling sensibilities.

But while there is triumphalism in conflict, there is no joy in it. Any soldier who stakes his life upon his oath knows that

san politicians. It was actually a welcome fact that the nuances of politics had kept politicians out of the first bus, and left the moment to ordinary Kashmiris with a vested interest in nothing more, and nothing less, than a peaceful reunion with loved ones. In other words, the militants have succeeded in alienating those whose sympathy is essential to their cause.

They should have considered a second outcome. This was the first time that Delhi and Islamabad condemned the same terrorist attack — and meant it. No government can permit terrorism to sabotage an international agreement. If anything, it strengthened the resolve to protect the bus route.

Islamabad has been careful about its position-play. While Prime Minister Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi went to Srinagar to flag off the bus, President Musharraf stayed at home. Islamabad treats the bus link as an "internal" matter between two Kashmiris. (While the presence of Mr Singh and Mrs Gandhi was welcome, foreign minister Natwar Singh might have resisted the temptation of a photo opportunity.) The attack on the passengers however placed Delhi and Islamabad on the same side of an important barricade — the barricade against violence. The strong condemnation of the attack by the Pakistan media is an element of the same story.

Cynics carped. So what? What else should we expect from cynics? A fellow journalist from the audiovisual media asked me

indeed Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee — for it was during his tenure that the idea was mooted and gained strength — deserve credit for listening to the aching murmurs of the Kashmiri heart.

Two buses on April 7 crossed a psychological barrier as much as a physical one. For the first time since partition, the much-interrupted peace process has some real meaning for the Kashmiri people. For the first time in nearly six decades, the warmth on the dividing line comes not from the heat of artillery shells but from emotions beyond the reach of words. Only those who have been divided truly understand the meaning of partition. History created two nations in 1947. That cannot be changed. But no history, not even the history of tyrants, gives governments the right to destroy the ties of kinship and friendship that keep human society humane.

I particularly enjoyed the remark of one passenger from Muzaffarabad who arrived without a single relative on our side of the Line of Control. Every Kashmiri was his relative, he said. *Touche*. It was extremely sensible of Delhi not to deny him an entry permit on such a technicality. If a tourist cannot come to Srinagar, where on earth should he go?

This warmth will melt much more than the tensions of Kashmir. Punjab is already beginning to stir. A series of visits between leaders of the two Punjab has already generated hope that Muslims, Sikhs and

upon his oath knows that he should be a government's last resort, not an adventurist's first move. A nation may be won by the sword, but it can only be built by the ploughshare.

Could there be regress? Of course there could. Could this burst of optimism degenerate into another swamp swarming with the usual dangers? Yet again, if Delhi and Islamabad treat the bus through Kashmir as a crowning achievement rather than the beginning of yet another difficult but no longer hopeless phase in their relationship.

It is not entirely fortuitous that President Musharraf has sought the excuse of a cricket match in Delhi and Prime Minister Singh has agreed to host him within less than a fortnight of the start of the bus. That will provide the opportunity to set the parameters of the next phase of the relationship. There has to be a sustained and sustainable dialogue on Jammu and Kashmir, as well as pace in the eco-political equation. India cannot shy away from Kashmir and Pakistan cannot shy away from trade.

There are creative opportunities awaiting thought. Imagination and initiative have set up a gas pipeline that both India and Pakistan have defended against an American objection. There is much thinking to do on subjects like nuclear doctrine, and the objective use of strength to protect our common economic interests. History awaits the next moment.

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