

Bus opens new possibilities over Kashmir

Kashmir
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A great beginning has been made. For the first time, a process of reconciliation has been initiated over the most divisive issue of Kashmir, with the reunion of divided Kashmiri families after five long decades. The tremendous welcome that the lucky passengers of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service received on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) defied the militants' desperate reaction a day earlier. It shows an extreme gulf between an overwhelming majority of Kashmiris who want to give peace a chance and a handful of isolated militants still clinging to guns in isolation. Can the bus and gun go together? And can a path of reconciliation process really deliver in the end?

India and Pakistan reached an agreement to start a bus service across the LoC due to flexibility they both showed, especially India who agreed to accept the local permit, instead of passport and visa, as a valid travel document. For its part, Pakistan had to drop its insistence on the UN papers. The agreement in fact showed, for the first time, an outside the box thinking that corresponds neither to India's stated position nor to Pakistan's traditional stand. Minor concessions by both, such as allowing Indians to cross over or allowing access to Northern Areas, are of no practical consequence. However, without prejudice to their respective stands, the two governments made an initial breakthrough over the deadlock on the most important Kashmir-specific CBM. This is, of course, not the

end, but the beginning of the process.

Seeing the response of the people to the bus service, the Indian and Pakistani leaderships have shown their willingness to open all other routes as well. Running a fortnightly bus across a still hazardous route will not serve the purpose of reuniting hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris across an otherwise inhuman dividing line. The bus can become an easy prey to the ambush of terrorists.

In fact, all traditional routes between the adjoining districts should be opened for travel on foot or/and bus leaving little room for the extremists to turn the "bus into the coffin" of innocent Kashmiris. Free movement of the Kashmiris across an arbitrary dividing line will not only provide interim relief to the divided families, but also bring them at the centre-stage of the solution to the problem. This cannot be possible without silencing the gun. The gun and the bus are incompatible.

To silence the gun, it is imperative that the militant outfits are convinced about the participation of the Kashmiris in the negotiation process and brought into the mainstream after granting amnesty to those who are willing to bid farewell to arms. On the other hand, both Pakistan and India must together take measures to stop violence — be it by militant outfit or security forces. For militants to take a back seat, it is necessary that the political leadership of various regions of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir is brought forward and engaged in the dialogue process. Unfortunately, the men with guns had rendered the political leadership ineffective. Now is the time for them to

capture the centre-stage.

With more confidence building measures focusing Jammu and Kashmir, a situation will be created to further soften the LoC, allowing Kashmiris to interact among themselves and weigh the different options that serve their aspirations without offending New Delhi and Islamabad. Such a situation will provide a unique opportunity to India and Pakistan to take the process of reconciliation forward. Such a process, uninterrupted by violence, can eventually produce a solution that is acceptable to all the three parties to the conflict.

Immediately after the buses arrived at their destination, Mr. Natwar Singh, External Affairs Minister of India, showed readiness to consider all options on Kashmir except 'redrawing the map of India' and having a 'second partition'. Since turning the LoC into a permanent international border is not acceptable to Pakistan or to the Kashmiris, a middle course can be found through an innovative approach. There are various successful examples and proposals that can be studied to find a solution to the Kashmir dispute that is satisfactory for both India and Pakistan and, above all, the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

Indeed, what Pakistan should appreciate is that India cannot afford nor tolerate a division of J&K on religious lines. Given a new emphasis on the will of the Kashmiri people in Pakistan's new moderate position, a solution that permanently divides the people of the former princely state will not be acceptable to most people in all the distinct regions of J&K. Therefore, the efforts to find a solution should be

focused on such solutions and plans elsewhere that have successfully tackled such conflicts. And there is more than one example of such options. But for that to happen, India will have to be ready to rethink its position. It will be quite difficult for a status quo power, but essential for peace and friendly co-existence in the subcontinent.

There are, at least, half a dozen models that can be examined and creatively adopted to the situation of J&K. If the solution to the Territory of Trieste, over which Yugoslavia and Italy shared sovereign rights, may appear to be a 'communal division' to Indians, then they can consider Andorra, a principality claimed by Spain and France, as a model. If New Delhi does not accept that, since it may ultimately give the J&K an almost independent status, it could consider the solution found to the South Tyrol dispute between Italy and Austria. Now South Tyrol has got highest degree of autonomy that India can concede (since it claims that only sky is the limit to autonomy) to its part of semi-sovereign J&K that should, in turn, be allowed to freely interact with the Pakistani side of Kashmir and Northern Areas, including the formation of joint federating councils and other administrative institutions.

Other solutions can be partly mixed with existing models, such as Aaland Island, a disputed territory between Sweden and Finland, and Sami Parliamentary Assembly, a joint platform of regional parliaments of the Sami people spread across the northern regions of Norway, Sweden and Finland. The Basque leader Jose Ibarretxe's proposal for 'shared sovereignty and free asso-

ciation' can also be suitably adopted without formally compromising Indian and Pakistani territorial claims over J&K. The Good Friday Agreement to resolve the Northern Ireland's status can be yet another model to explore a solution to the dispute over Kashmir.

The real issue is that India and Pakistan must think out of the box and adopt an innovative approach to tackle the Kashmir problem. If that happens, not only will a grand mass of people of India and Pakistan benefit, but also the hapless Kashmiris. But, most importantly, let the process continue, be patient and let the Kashmiris create a new ground reality across a softened LoC.

The window that the Muzaffarabad-Srinagar bus service has opened should be expanded to all other routes allowing the people of adjoining districts and regions to mix freely. They should also be allowed to have trade and consultative bodies for the development of their areas. Meanwhile, as the peace process further consolidates, India and Pakistan should take more confidence building measures to improve the security and human rights situation in J&K and engage the Kashmiris in the dialogue process.

There is no quick-fix solution. It can, however, be found through the process that should tackle both Indo-Pak bilateral issues and also find solutions to the Kashmir dispute. If both get out of their straitjackets of ideological bellicosity, it is not difficult to find a solution. Let the bus go on in all directions and stop the gun whoever is holding it against the people of Kashmir. Let Musharraf and Manmohan set the direction, at least, and make it irreversible.