

Dateline Srinagar

# Kashmiri children in the lap of an uncertain future

Teddy bears are out. It is toy guns and pistols which make up their favourite games

By Arjima



The colours of life for the four-year-old Asrar are not as they are. Born in Srinagar in the midst of raging hostilities between Indian armed forces and separatist guerrillas, he shouts "bomb blast" whenever he sees a sunset! His uneasy world is overshadowed by the ruthless presence of bunkers, Indian armed forces—dotting almost every nook and corner of Kashmir, occasional firing and grenade incidents, cordon and search operations.

The ogre that has unleashed his ugly shadow over Kashmir has not spared even the beautiful little world which children usually draw bliss from.

It was a sunny spring day in early 1989, when the first bomb blast went off in Kashmir, coincidentally outside the largest school in Srinagar—the missionary Tyndale Bisco School, near the city centre's Lal Chowk. As the deafening sound of the blast shattered the air, hundreds of students (including this scribe), playing football in the school ground, froze in a standstill. One aluminum splinter of the bomb had harmlessly

curious students flocked around it to see an object that in reality had heralded a new way of life for children in Kashmir. That bomb blast was also an omen of the mass uprising, which Kashmir witnessed in the early '90s.

As the peace-loving and temperamentally non-violent Kashmiri youth took to guns in their pursuit of the dream of a free Kashmir, and people en masse took to streets in their demand for *azadi*, children too have had a swift shift from books to streets. The mass demonstrations of the early '90s saw Kashmiri children taking part in the same in large numbers—a phenomenon attributed by psychologists to children's greater degree of sensitivity to the mass wave of *azadi* which swept the Valley during that time.

The new life made children vulnerable to instability in their lives. As guns slowly prevailed over slogans, the street was no longer a safe place for children. That was a time when almost every part of Srinagar and all the towns of the Valley were fortified with bunkers and posts by Indian armed forces. That was also the time when many children were

Although some guerrilla groups are known to have prevented children from joining their ranks, many groups welcomed children as well, supposedly to supplement their ranks. The chaos of the early '90s prevented schools from functioning for over a year. Since thousands of schools and colleges were burnt down by unidentified people (government blames the acts of arson to some guerrilla groups) during that time, educational system was almost crumbled in the Valley. The large-scale anti-insurgency operations launched by the army, long spells of curfews and *hartaals*, and guerrillas' public show of arms had an adverse psychological impact on the children in Kashmir.

Schools and colleges became favourite hideouts of the youth having taken to guns. As lawlessness became the natural by-product, examinations at all school, college and university levels were marked by mass copying in 1991. The copying menace, which has now been brought under control, sounded the death knell for educational system in Kashmir. Continuous bloodshed and chaos has seen

children developing severe psychological ailments in Kashmir. The transformation from a relatively peaceful society to that of one dogged by violence and bloodshed resulted in a number of aberrations in the lives of children in Kashmir. Scores of children have disappeared since the last twelve years. Studies have shown that over 40,000 children have been orphaned till now. However, for the absence of any major relief and rehabilitation plan for these orphans, only a few local NGOs working with limited resources have rehabilitated a few hundred.

Life for children in rural and hilly areas in Kashmir is more troublesome than in urban areas. Vast tracts of forest and mountain areas are mined in Jammu & Kashmir, and scores of children have been killed after straying over them. Children in rural areas are also vulnerable to attraction to unexploded explosives. A number of children have been killed in such incidents. Children in rural Kashmir have also to reconcile with heavy restrictions in their movement. Although government schools do function in rural Kashmir, however, the atmosphere of uncertainty is seeing increasing number of dropouts.

Children have developed strong curiosity for the posts of snipers that overlook almost every street and crossing in Srinagar. The atmosphere of fear and uncertainty has also given birth to unusual playing habits in children in Kashmir. Gone are the days when Eid was a time of merry-making. Now Eid is an occasion to do in mock whatever happens in real with guns and bombs. As fire crackers and a variety of toy guns sell on Eid freely, Srinagar and other cities and towns in the Valley wear the look of a virtual battle field, where children play soldiers and *mujahids*, and crackers and toy guns act as fire arms. Children in Kashmir have to live a tight life.

Schools start functioning quite early in the morning. By afternoon children must be home. There is usually no outdoor playing. Home is the ultimate refuge. Fewer children in Srinagar have seen the evening lights of the streets, most of which do not function now. Television has replaced all other modes of entertainment. Amidst the looming uncertainty and an atmosphere of fear, what hangs in balance is the future of a whole generation of Kashmiris who have little to choose from. And nobody knows when these children would come out from the abyss of darkness to the real colours of life.

## Bookwatch A Khaki version of Indo-Pak relations

Reviewed by V B Rawat

Indo-Pak relations have been a subject of intense discussions for many in the sub-continent, including the 'security hawks' and hate mongering foreign ministry experts. General K M Arif held important positions in the Pakistan Army under different presidents and was particularly closer to General Ziaul Haq.

Like many Pakistanis Arif also thinks that the stories on Indo-Pak wars have been a one-sided affair so far as only Indian versions have come out and Pakistan government has unnecessarily put restrictions on such publication. This is a lament by no less than a general that Pakistan should be an open society, and that the military should better concentrate on its professional duties rather than meddling in the political affairs of the country on a regular basis.

It is interesting to note the different intrigues that Pakistan policy faces, and the reasons cited by the author to justify military rule in Pakistan, though he must be complimented to put the internal security situation in Pakistan in a very clear perspective. But Arif has really been parochial and conventionalist when writing about India. His entire thesis on India shows how military in both the countries has prejudices and bias about each other. The Pakistan Army, therefore, does not hide its communal leanings in terming India as a Hindu state, while Pakistan as a Muslim country.

The author terms Nehru as a Hindu leader who had a vision for the country, while Pakistan after the first round of leadership of the likes of M A Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan lacked a second ranking leadership.

The author says that the 1965 Indo-Pak war was an unintended war in which 'each side reacted disproportionately to the perceived provocation by the other and in the end lost control'. But he, nevertheless, blames India for the aggression quoting a known Jansangh leader U M

Trivedi in the Lok Sabha that the Indian Army must go 'right up to Lahore to bring Pakistan to its senses'.

The author goes on to comment on the East Pakistan crisis of 1971. Unlike many Pakistanis, he admits the fault of a Punjabi dominated bureaucracy and leadership to ignore the claims of Bengalis in Pakistan's national-political life. He says that since most of the Punjabis and Sindhis were educated enough, hence they had a major share in the bureaucracy; unfortunately, Bengalis did not have the 'trained manpower' and most importantly they were culturally dominated by Hindus who had a grudge against Pakistan. There was a slanderous campaign about uneven treatment given to East Pakistanis. According to the author, Pakistani leadership should have acted in a mature fashion to diffuse the crisis. It is interesting to note that the general blames the illiterate and untrained Bengali leadership for their under-representation in the services and leadership, and feels that it was overreacted by the Awami League President Sheikh Mujeeb, who was conspiring against the Pakistanis with clear support from the Indian ruling establishment.

Writing about the Mohajir problem in Pakistan, the author makes these points: "These people had settled in Pakistan but could not emotionally disengage themselves from the Ganga-Jamuna culture. Instead of merging themselves with the social and cultural environment of Sindh to create a new and enriched blend of distinctive identity for Pakistan, they endeavored to practice their UP culture in the desert of Sindh and hoped that their cultural identity would also be adopted by the old Sindhis." Interestingly, the general does not say that Pakistan itself became a victim of its own identity problem and that Muslim League a party of rich peasantry and migrants from UP had to ultimately bow to the



pressure of local ethnic identities; though he suggests that military interventions in Pakistan came because of a virtually corrupt and defunct political leadership and Army being a nationalist organisation could not have allowed the country to go on like this.

Appreciably, the general still points out that Army is not the final answer for Pakistan's problems but it is democracy, which will make Pakistan a strong nation. He laments how the vision of a democratic, plural and progressive Pakistan was lost due to the lure of power by the powerful feudal elite in Pakistan, which usurped everything in the name of democracy. He says, "Military dictators were not the sole spoilers of the democratic order. Many elected leaders in the country were, in fact, only democratic in name but autocratic in their conduct and behavior. They promoted a brand of sham democracy to further their personal interests and for reasons of political expediency."

The author must be complimented for bringing out the most intriguing factors of Pakistan polity and its armed forces, and he no doubt admits that in the power game it was West Pakistan, which dominated despite East Pakistan's majority. Terming Z A Bhutto as 'a feudal by birth, a socialist by his own declaration, but a capitalist at heart', he says that Bhutto's downfall was ultimately his own creation. The democratic institutions were considerably weakened during his period. That was a fact also in the case of Nawaz Sharif, which paved way for the intervention of the Army under General Pervez Musharraf.

The general gives the version of what Musharraf gave to Pakistan, and does not try to give the other side of the story. He says that since the institution of Army was under threat, hence Musharraf had to intervene. In an interesting revelation, the author says that General Zia was not

interested to step in when Bhutto's personalised cult touched a nadir in Pakistan. It was Bhutto who wanted to divide the Army, and the latter declined to fire on protesters against the Bhutto administration, which Zia feared would divide the only institution of Pakistan. Arif cannot not hide his military bias when he says that it was not the military which gave the death sentence to Bhutto, but the courts; and that Zia ultimately gave his consent for the final hanging under public pressure. Given the cult of Bhutto in Pakistan even today, one can only laugh at this. The fact is that Zia went against a very large number of international appeals for an amnesty to Bhutto and handed him so that he could rule Pakistan uninterrupted.

This book has an interesting narration and many new things for the students of South Asian politics and Army interventions in Pakistan. Perhaps, this is for the first time that a Pakistani general has openly given his viewpoint on the polity of the country. It is also good that a general of his caliber supports democratic set-up in the country and wants the Army to be out of its day-to-day politics. However, there are many things, which need to be introspected by the Indians and Pakistanis, which is about our shared history and culture. It is here where Army men need more concentration, otherwise how could one justify the comment by Arif about Mohajirs practising 'Ganga Jamuna' culture in Pakistan as against its new identity of Pakistan?

This book must be read by all, particularly Indians, as it gives the 'other side' of story. It is an informative work and gives us ample scope to introspect.

**Khaki Shadows: Pakistan (1947-1997)**

By General K M Arif  
Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2001  
Pages: not mentioned  
Pages: 450

Letters and articles are welcome and should be addressed to:

The Editor  
Political Economy,  
The News on Sunday  
4th Floor, Al-Rahman Bldg.  
11 Chundrigar Road  
Karachi-PAKISTAN

Voice: 9221-2630611-5 ext 2567  
Fax: 9221-2418343-44  
Email: edpe@mail.com

All must include writer's full name, address and home telephone; contents may be edited for purposes of clarity or space.