

Fresh perspectives on Kashmir

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Now Kashmir is not exactly my forte and God forbid I would never want to have an expertise on Kashmir because I'm not a retired General, bureaucrat or a former ambassador with the 'past' firmly on the leash like an Abu Ghraib prisoner, ready to abuse, distort and fictionalise at one's convenience and whim. Therefore without a doctorate in state patronage, flirting with a topic like Kashmir is difficult, if not outright dangerous; at best a person can manage a daring yoo-hoo.

Be it the Kashmir cause, Blasphemy Law or the Hudood Ordinance, they have never been a hot electoral issue; come election time, the voter has never shown the slightest fascination whether the elected member of Parliament was supporting a *jihadi* flag or a rainbow coloured peace flag in Kashmir.

The recent display of athleticism by our elected members of Parliament was displayed in their feat when they were literally jumping over commandoes to shake hands with the President in the National Assembly, only proves that the treasury benches are fully behind him. So at this juncture in time, if the big boss wants the MNAs to amend the Hudood Ordinance, do away with Blasphemy Law and pass a visionary resolution on Kashmir, they will all behave like Pakistanis did when Collin Powell made his first phone

call after 9/11. With the entire burden of the State apparatus and terrorist threats, the President should start delegating some work on to the honourable members of Parliament. He should use the Parliament on a regular basis, as a litmus test for loyalty, get things rolling like a reefer; after all that's what they are there for.

Another issue highlighted by our academics regarding the violence in Kashmir is our textbooks. Now how many of you reading this column

door to door campaigning in rural districts for the past fifteen years, I have noticed the statistics to have alarmingly changed; an average household in a rural district 'today', an average household being based on a joint family system, has a couple of MA degree holders sitting around idle and unemployed, waiting for an incentive of a government job.

The reason for the optimism of textbooks touting armchair warriors should be that the 'majority' of those MAs, with 'genuine' degrees, have

textbooks at the first place.

Recently, at a private screening I saw Pervaiz Hoodbuoy's documentary film on Kashmir. Whether one tends to love or hate Hoodbuoy, one credit must be given to him, for the newness and difference of opinion, the man stands out. The video doesn't offer a tailor-made solution to the Kashmir problem. What's been missing in finding solutions for the Kashmir conundrum is objectivity, and that is exactly what the film focuses on.

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have read any textbooks or remember what you read in a textbook when you were in grade X. If I may be bold enough to assume, not even 5% of us pay heed on what is being taught in class. Now don't get me wrong, academics are an important part of a healthy society and culture, and no five-star hotel seminar, meeting or TV talk show is complete without them. I fully endorse that textbooks propagating hate should be changed.

In the 70s there was an opening of six government jobs in Dera Ghazi Khan Division for candidates who had done FA (high school). The requirement could not be met. After

never seen a text book in their life, they either bought the degrees directly or paid someone else for sitting through the examinations. These boys might join *jihadi* outfits not because they read some rubbish in a textbook but for more profound socio-economic reasons.

In this scenario the benefits of the cheating culture could miraculously be utilised: once the academics manage to change the textbooks, they can literally start from scratch. The bigger challenge for academics in the long run will not just be changing textbooks but for coming up with revolutionary plans to actually make students read the

Although it might sound like a Murree Brewery commercial but the 'finest and rarest blend of ideas' came from Mino Bhandara, one of the guest speakers who spoke after the airing of the film. He mentioned that there is a disputed territory between Spain and France but there is free access on both sides, to a point that politics of the region does not affect the common man on the street. The gist of his speech was: soft-borders, easy access to both sides, people interacting freely and openly.

The problem is that for both Pakistan and India, Kashmir is such a classic pink Cadillac, vintage issue that its appeal has been too much of a turn-on to turndown. So while we waste our time in talk and no action, let the interaction, Mino Bhandara style be freed up from NOC requirements, and move on to the next level.

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A cooler South Asia

TEMPERATURES IN NEW DELHI SOARED PAST 100 DEGREES LAST week, typical for this time of year and formerly a good incentive to flee to the northern state of Kashmir, rent a houseboat and fish for trout in cold mountain streams. But for more than a decade, Kashmir has been more accustomed to shootings and bombings than vacations. Recent moves by India and Pakistan indicate they are serious about ending their decades-long quarrel over the region, the main sticking point between two countries that have fought three wars and now have nuclear weapons.

The two nations' foreign secretaries met for two days last week, their first talks in six years. Later, they took advantage of a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Jakarta for a private huddle and to separately brief US Secretary of State Colin L Powell. Washington played a big part in keeping Islamabad and New Delhi from going to war two years ago and should not let South Asia drop off the radar screen because of Iraq or other US problems.

The foreign secretaries' meeting was disappointing in that it didn't get much beyond a boilerplate statement of agreement to reach an eventual 'peaceful, negotiated final settlement' on Kashmir. There was, however, limited progress in other areas such as reopening diplomatic missions. Even those small steps are important in building a foundation for agreement on bigger issues. Such progress would have been unthinkable in 2002, when the two countries massed nearly 1 million troops along their border.

Credit for reducing tensions goes to the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Indian government that was voted out of office in May. Unfortunately, the BJP is now accusing the new Congress Party-led government of giving away too much in negotiations with Pakistan. Considering the tentative moves on both sides, the party's claims are cheap politics, not substantive criticism. But the carping does reflect the pressures on the new prime minister, Manmohan Singh, to be a tough bargainer with Pakistan. Nor is Pakistan's leader, Pervez Musharraf, immune from pressure, especially from hard-line Islamists willing to cross from Pakistan's portion of Kashmir into India's territory to inflict terror in the only predominantly Muslim state in India.

Violence in Kashmir began in 1989 after India rigged a state election. Muslim radicals crossing from Pakistan have been responsible for many of the more than 60,000 deaths in the last 15 years. Pakistan says it has stopped the border crossings, and it indeed must do so if it ever hopes to solve its biggest conflict with India since both nations became independent from Britain in 1947.

Problems that develop over decades are not solved in weeks or months. But if the two countries can keep talking rather than conducting missile tests and putting troops on their border, they should eventually be able to agree to let each other live in peace. —LAT, July 5