

Kashmir bus service in retrospect

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ISLAMABAD: Witnessing the launch of much-awaited intra-Kashmir bus service last week was a unique and stirring experience. It was a momentous day for Kashmiris on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) as sun and clouds played hide and seek, with a gushing river snaking through the lofty green mountains.

April 7, 2005, the day the first Kashmir bus was flagged off from Muzaffarabad, presented an amazing and most moving spectacle. In a powerful expression of solidarity, a vast majority of Muzaffarabad residents came out to cheer the passengers as the bus, bearing registration plate AJK-F1, rolled out to connect the capitals of the two parts of Kashmir and reunite families separated for the last 57 years.

A stream of Kashmiris climbed the mountain peaks and hilltops and assembled on the roadside to see history in the making. In an emphatic endorsement of the landmark measure, men, women and children, young and old, all stood along the 62-km Muzaffarabad-Chakothi bus route to cheer the 30 passengers, including three women. Hundreds of thousands of onlookers clapped, waved, showered flower petals and raised full throated slogans of Allah- o-Akbar and Pakistan Zindabad.

Emotions ran high and sentiments of joy, nostalgia, and disbelief marked the occasion. It was a celebration of reunion with unprecedented dignity and grace.

Notably most of the 30 passengers from AJK who embarked on the first Kashmir bus from Muzaffarabad represented the relatively privileged class of Kashmiris. They included two retired judges, a retired secretary, a former police officer, two advocates, the Muzaffarabad district joint action committee chairman, former members of the AJK legislative assembly, social workers, activists, and journalists. In one case a passenger had no close relatives in held Kashmir. In contrast, most of the 19 green-capped passengers coming from Srinagar appeared to be ordinary and elderly people. The oldest passenger from Srinagar was 75-year-old Ghulam Haider Khan who said Allah had perhaps kept him alive just to experience the historic journey.

A colossal effort went into the preparations for the bus service. Some 7,000 workers were recruited for road repairs and construction, removal of bunkers and clearing landmines during this period to ensure that the bus service began on the scheduled date. Apparently, the white coloured bridge had been initially painted orange and green by the Indians to reflect their flag. However, when a Pakistani corps commander visited the area a day before the bus launch, he disapproved of this. Subsequently, better sense prevailed and the Indians decided to go for the neutral white, signifying peace. So it was that till the eve of the bus launch the bridge connecting people of divided Kashmir was changing colours.

Beneath the new metal 'peace bridge' still hangs part of the 1945 weather-beaten wooden foot-bridge, a stark reminder of the past armed conflict and two wars fought over the mighty Himalayan region.

Mehbooba Mufti, daughter of occupied Kashmir's chief minister Mufti Mohammad Sayed and chairperson of the state's ruling party, sprang a surprise by travelling with the passengers from Srinagar. Clad in a flowing dark green Kashmiri outfit, a beaming Ms Mufti almost crossed the Chakothi bridge to see off the passengers. She was just a few steps away from the Pakistani side where a battery of photographers frantically clicked away to capture the rare sight. Ms Mufti told AJK additional secretary Dr. Mehmud-ul-Hasan that she had come to boost the morale of her people.

In a telling observation, the AJK prime minister said it had taken 57 long years to cross the 210 ft long bridge. The fate of the LoC will be determined in the months and years ahead. The Kashmir bus may have speeded up the process.