**The Tale of Two Valleys: Kashmir and Fergana**

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We, human beings, are more interested in stories rather than facts. Here is a tale, wrapped in facts, of the two most beautiful valleys in the world: Kashmir and Fergana. Both the valleys of Kashmir and Fergana are strategically and economically important to their respective regions of South Asia and Central Asia. Though these valleys inherited similar pasts, they are living distinctive presents. This article is an attempt to present an inimitable analogy that exists between Fergana and Kashmir valley and, an account of what their futures possibly hold for us. Cradled in the lap of the mighty Himalayas, the Kashmir Valley is the most beautiful place on earth. It is located on the north-western side of the subcontinent, sandwiched between India, Pakistan and China, with the maximum part being governed by India.

King Ashoka, in 250 BC, established the city of Srinagar and included Kashmir Valley in his empire. It was during this era that Buddhism spread in the region. Later on, different dynasties ruled the valley, from the Karkota dynasty in the 7th Century AD to the Lohara dynasty till the 14th Century AD.

The First Muslim rule in the Kashmir Valley was established by Sultan Shamas-ud-din, in 1339. The valley was annexed to the Mughal empire in 1586. In the year 1819, the Kashmir valley was annexed by Ranjit Singh to his Sikh empire. After defeating Sikhs in two wars, the British took control of the valley and later, handed it over to Gulab Singh for 75 lakhs of Rupees, in 1846, under the Treaty of Amritsar.

Both valleys have been captured and recaptured by different rulers at different times due to their strategically vital landscapes.

At the time of partition, Kashmir was a princely state, which had been given a choice to join either Pakistan or India or remain independent. At that time, the majority of the population of Kashmir were Muslims and aspired to join Pakistan. In 1948, war broke out between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Maharajah Hari Singh annexed Kashmir to India, albeit the aspiration of the people were the opposite. War resulted in the occupation of 38 per cent and 62 per cent of the total territory of Kashmir by Pakistan and India, respectively. The Ceasefire was established as a result of the United Nation’s resolution that guaranteed a plebiscite in Kashmir. However, the resolution has never been materialised. Since the partition, the Kashmir issue remains volatile over the decades and is a key determinant for ensuring stability in the South Asian region.

On the other hand, the Fergana Valley is located in the heart of Central Asia. It is split among three states of the former Soviet Union. The valley stretches across Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, with the largest part being governed by Uzbekistan. The valley is the most fertile and populous region in Central Asia, comprising one-fourth of the total population while occupying only five per cent of land of the whole region.

The history of the Fergana Valley dates back to the times of Alexander the Great, when in 329 BC, he founded the city of Alexandria Eschate “The Furthest,” on its South-eastern side. Over the first millennium, different Chinese dynasties ruled the valley with impunity. Timur, a Turco-Mongol conquer, established the first Muslim rule over the valley. Due to its location on the historical Silk Route, Fergana Valley served as a crossroads for the east-west trade during the medieval era.

In the following decades, Islam hugely spread in the valley, which became the cultural, religious and intellectual hub of the Muslim civilization. Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire, is a famous son of Fergana Valley. The valley was ruled by different Muslim Khanates till it was made part of the Russian empire in 1876.

During the Soviet era, Joseph Stalin designed a complex program to divide central Asia into different nationalities on the basis of ethnicity. However, the Fergana Valley was so intertwined with different ethnicities that giving it to a single state was impossible.

Since the emergence of new states in 1991, several skirmishes have been noted among states in the valley. However, each time a conflict has been resolved through consultation and cooperation using the regional Platform of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The latest conflict occurred over the Golovnoy water distribution network on April 22, 2021. However, both the president of Tajikistan, Imamali Rahman and the president of Kyrgyzstan, Caparov, met and resolved the issue through dialogue and consultation.

The Kashmir and Fergana Valleys have some striking similarities; both have huge water reservoirs that are used for irrigation and energy production by adjacent states; Likewise, both the valleys have been captured and recaptured by different rulers at different times, due to their strategically vital landscapes. Conflict in both valleys has territorial roots and finds its origin in the grand “divide and rule” policy of foreign powers.

Despite these similarities, both the valleys are not carrying the same fate. While the Kashmir valley is engulfed in extreme violence and instability, Pakistan and India resorted to fighting three bloody wars over conflict in the valley. Contrary to this, conflict in Fergana valley never escalated.

Resolution of the Kashmir conflict is crucial for the stability and peace of South Asia. Like Fergana Valley, Kashmir is a regional conflict. So, it needs to be resolved through a regional approach. For this matter, the first step would be to reactivate and functionalise the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Secondly, diplomatic ties between India and Pakistan must be strengthened. As a confidence-building measure (CBM), the third step would be to resume trade between them. Lastly, conflict in the valley must be resolved through dialogue and mutual cooperation, in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir. As witnessed by the successful Indus Water Treaty of 1960, similarly, the Kashmir conflict can be resolved through cooperation rather than competition.

The two valleys are crucial for the future of their respective regions. If the Fergana Valley ensures Central Asian peace, the Kashmir valley is critical for South Asian stability. If the Fergana Valley is the staging point of the old Silk Route, Kashmir can become the focal point of the new Silk Route (Belt and Road Initiative). However, this dream of peace can only be materialised into reality by taking measures for conflict resolution. Therefore, this shift from competition to cooperation can guarantee a twinkling future for the region.

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