**Nawaz Meets Barkha Dutt**

**Sharif’s testimonial is a historical one accepting the onus of blame.**

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On October 14, a senior journalist from India Barkha Dutt called on Pakistan’s former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and current Chief Minister of Punjab Maryam Nawaz at the Chief Minister office in Lahore.

Dutt wanted to enquire about a statement of Sharif on the Lahore Declaration of February 1999. Sharif had said in May this year that he was disappointed at seeing the failure of his efforts to initiate peace with India in the wake of the Lahore Declaration signed by him and India’s former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on the visit of an Indian delegation to Lahore. Sharif also said that, by launching the Kargil war, it was the mistake of Pakistan to have violated the Lahore Declaration. On Dutt’s enquiry, Sharif reiterated his statement.

Sharif’s testimonial is a historical one accepting the onus of blame. Pakistan was a spoiler of the peace that Sharif wanted to initiate with India after both countries had tested their nuclear weapons in 1998. Sharif wanted peace and trade to solve the pending disputes and alleviate poverty in his country. Disengagement from war (with mutually assured destruction by the use of nuclear weapons) would have spared funds and attention to invest in the social and economic uplift of both neighbours. Unfortunately, Sharif’s dream could not come true and the then Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Pervez Musharraf launched a clandestine military operation to cross the Line of Control (LoC) in the Kargil-Drass sector of Kashmir.

For Dutt, Sharif’s statement was an expression of solemn regret by a former prime minister in an effort to correct history. However, for Pakistanis, this is half regret. The other half is that immediately after the end of the Kargil War in July 1999, Sharif did not form a commission on the Kargil war, despite public demand. Sharif must be fearful of the reaction of the army. The worst could have been to overturn his government. Despite all dithering, Sharif could not save this government which was taken over by Musharraf in October 1999 under the pretext of eradicating corruption from society. A military general who violated a written promise of peace between two civilian governments (and nuclear neighbours) turned out to be a military dictator who wanted to save society from corruption. This is not the end of the story. India invited the same military dictator (in 2001 to Agra, and in 2005 to New Delhi) and tried to enter into an agreement over the Kashmir issue, under the assumption that the violator of one agreement would abide by the next agreement. This was an expression of opportunism by India to gain something from a military dictator who had earlier disrespected an agreement, the Lahore Declaration. India should also regret that its act of engagement with a military dictator (the decision of whom in violation of his civilian ruler) had consumed the lives of hundreds of Indian soldiers in Kargil.

By not forming the Kargil Commission, Sharif tried to extend the life of his government. In principle, Sharif should have followed the voice of sanity. A probe was necessary. Dead bodies of hundreds of Pakistan’s soldiers were lying bare and unattended on both sides of the LoC, as the Pakistan army had to withdraw from Kargil Heights without announcing a ceasefire. The Indian army continued with its air and field assaults. Many of Pakistan’s soldiers are still unaccounted for. The ceasefire could not be announced because Musharraf had publicly claimed that those who were fighting were not Pakistan’s soldiers but the Kashmiri Mujahideens who had ascended the heights and restricted the movements of Indian troops on the other side of the LoC. Consequently, Pakistan bore the brunt of the lie, abandoning its soldiers unprotected on their withdrawal. Even Pakistan’s air force could not help them to have save descend. If an Indian army Brigadier (M.P.S Bajwa) had not appreciated the bravery of the late Captain Karnal Sher Khan, no one in Pakistan could have awarded the late captain with Nishan-e Haider, the top gallantry award. Those who say that the perpetrators of May 9 (2023) committed a heinous crime of putting on fire or damaging effigies of fallen soldiers observe silence on disclaiming corpses of soldiers who lost their lives in the Kargil War as if the lost soldiers were sons of lesser Pakistanis. The remains of these soldiers are still scattered in the heights unburied. No head rolled on this forsaking, but May 9 was a great insult. To neutralize this kind of criticism, a couple of weeks ago, Pakistan’s current COAS publicly appreciated the sacrifices of lost soldiers in Kargil, thereby opening space for the recovery of their remains, and burying them with respect in their home towns.

Retrospectively, the Kargil War was a disaster for Pakistan, which lost its international standing as a responsible country with nuclear weapons meant for deterrence. By launching the Kargil War, Pakistan dishonored its own nuclear deterrence theory. India got a chance to project Pakistan as an aggressor, the accusation which kept the world mum on India’s changing the status of its part of Kashmir in August 2019. Above all, Sharif had to abandon the dream of reconciliation with India to secure economic prosperity for Pakistan and had to move abroad with his whole family.

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