

# Passage to India

Pak. F. Didi - India  
Dawn 3.1.07

By Sherry Rehman

A FEW weeks ago, when a train-load of Indian peace activists landed at Karachi cantonment station looking dazed but excited, the Pakistani hosts receiving them sent up a clutch of doves in the air. Just a few days later, a similar kind of welcome met us the moment three of us crossed the Wagah border as part of the third unofficial Pakistani parliamentary delegation to New Delhi.

Much had changed, yet much remains the same since the first visit we made only seven months ago. Garlands still weighed us down, although the media crush had thankfully abated. Nirmala Deshpande, the indefatigable icon of the peace movement, still stood waiting at midnight in the freezing Delhi cold as the Shatabdi Express from Amritsar pulled up at the station.

But this time, Nirmala Didi, as she is affectionately known across the country, was accompa-

so, it was clear that the old framework of catering to a chauvinistic Hindutva element in the domestic audience continues to define the outer limits of stated positions on both sides.

As in Pakistan, prejudice seesaws precariously with tolerance for pre-eminence in the psyche of mainstream India. At an NDTV debate one night, for instance, the shock of being hated hit hard when a parliamentarian who had recently visited Pakistan suddenly burst out to say that all Pakistanis live to hate Indians. At the same time, the next evening on a chat show, we were faced with opposite reactions amongst a large heterogeneous audience, who defended the humanist middle ground by attacking others they called the 'Indian Taliban' spread out around us. This group saw peace with Pakistan as an effort that would yield electoral dividends for Vajpayee in the forthcoming national poll.

The reality is that there is no one truth about either Kashmir, nor India, or even about Pakistan in this context. While in India none of us had used the words 'Disputed Territory'. What we

other institutional traffic into Srinagar will be a first step.

Secondly, New Delhi must review its policy of Siachinisation of the LoC by thinning out its troops on old trade routes, as much as it should consider redeployment of forces from the highest battleground in the world. Thirdly, a softer approach to human rights and civic entitlements in the valley must be initiated. A phased pull-back of troops and counter-insurgency forces as well as laws that brutalize the valley will not just build Kashmiri confidence, but cut back on indigenous discontent. As Farooq Abdullah, the erstwhile chief minister of Indian-held Kashmir said at a dinner he hosted for us, the valley has come a long way in the last 15 years.

The leadership of the BJP, including Mr Naidu, were not just quick to remind us that we were the first Pakistani delegation to be served tea by them, but were also quite intransigent in their discussion on the Indian violation of bilateral agreements by building a fence on their side of the LoC. Sixty per cent of the electronic fence is already com-

plete, we were told, and with new thermal imaging sensors and counter-insurgency operations concentrating forces in sectors where infiltration is highest, it was said that nothing on two or even four legs would be able to get past the surveillance dragnet. It served little purpose we thought, to build such a fence if it did not prevent infiltration across the LoC, especially since it goes against the Karachi Agreement of 1949, or the Shimla Pact of 1972.

In established democracies, going against agreements is not the preroga-

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the opportunity and value of a dialogue which invests us with the kind of memories we seek for our new generations. His narrative was enriched by a lively anecdotal base matched only by former premier I.K. Gujaral who locates his identity firmly in South Asia. Rooted in memories of FC College, Lahore, as father of the influential Gujaral Doctrine, I.K. still holds firm to his dream for a rich, trade-driven South Asia that is no longer hostage to the visceral bilateral politics of India and Pakistan.

The same principle seemed to animate Brijesh Mishra, Premier Vajpayee's right-hand man. Secure behind the vaulted, Lutyens-designed hallways of South Block, Mishra emerged as a man of crisp candour and good sense. Unlike last May, when he was noticeably unavailable, this time he was careful to listen to what we had to say, and equally cordial about his governments' expectations from the upcoming Saarc summit in the New Year. Later, not wanting to vitiate the goodwill that overcame our long and productive South Indian breakfast with the BJP's Defence Minister, George Fernandes, we chose to ignore Speaker Manohar Joshi's hard stance at the end of our presentation at the Lok Sabha meeting organized by our hosts, the South Asian Forum of Parliamentarians.

Not surprisingly, the node on which the votaries of change meet their nemesis is still manifest in the Sangh Parivar's interventions. Since the speaker of the Lok Sabha is from the Shiv Sena, his concluding remarks hung in the air like a cloud over the building. Yet the speeches from Pakistan, first by this writer and later by M.P. Bhandara, among three others from the SAARC region, had done little to provoke the old hard line: that Kashmir is an integral part of India and cannot even be discussed, period.

Most Indian delegates, including the indomitable Mrs Krishna Bose, from the Trinamool Congress, and head of the Foreign Relations Committee, found his remarks either distasteful or unnecessary. Given that India has been discussing Kashmir as part of any structured agenda at every single contact with Pakistan, from Shimla to Lahore, and will continue to do

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had suggested was that Kashmir, like all of India's concerns, be treated as an issue to be discussed on the negotiating table. Our concerns, in fact, were quite simple. If Indian officials are worried that cross-border terrorism, through training camps and communication centres in Azad Kashmir, be pro-actively dismantled, then that too must be considered by the Pakistani authorities.

Conversely, in order to make the ceasefire on the LoC hold beyond April, when the snows melt, New Delhi must recognize that infiltration has gone down successively. After that, proposals like joint patrolling of the LoC have to be seriously considered if we move forward on making the ceasefire sustainable. Secondly, if both armies are to move back from the LoC to a reasonable distance, demilitarization of the valley and surrounding areas will create a momentum of its own.

Thirdly, proscribed militant groups need to be clearly banned, not cosmetically. If the Hizbul Mujahideen leader, Syed Salahuddin, for instance, openly challenges state policy of not accepting the ceasefire, [Dec 15, 2003], then he should be duly checked or detained, especially when the Saarc summit is in process. Fourthly, public posturing aside, now would be a good time to review our own relationship with the Kashmiris.

The bald facts are that Islamabad's policy on Azad Kashmir has been one of patron-client exigencies, while our dealings with the APHC in the valley have dissipated old loyalties instead of generating new ones. The truth is that while Pakistan's name in Srinagar still wields clout, Islamabad has clearly blunted the edge of its influence after the split in the Hurriyet.

For India, whose stakes in conflict-resolution are higher than any other state in the region, transparency should be treated as the first building block to any enduring trust. To that end, our proposal for softening the LoC from an iron curtain to a velvet curtain should be seriously considered. Allowing media and

tive of one or two individuals. Whatever our thoughts on the utility of a UN plebiscite for Kashmir, it is clearly not for us to turn full circle on Pakistan's stated position and main negotiating plank for 55 years without first discussing it with not just the Kashmiris we know, but also with parliament and the public. General Musharraf's half-baked announcement on the plebiscite did not come out of the blue, it is true, but then neither did the clarification from the prime minister the next day.

What it did for us in India was make Pakistan seem unreliable and undemocratic. Television anchors put us on the spot by saying that clearly India cannot trust Musharraf. We were of course left to say that it is the end result that matters, and that our mutual focus must shift to institutionalizing a process which should be removed from the straitjacket of individual brinkmanship.

Which is, of course, exactly how it should be. If Benazir Bhutto makes bilateral concessions to Rajiv Gandhi, or Nawaz Sharif to Vajpayee, why must our establishment continue to treat all non-military actors as quislings of the opposite side, infected somehow with the seeds of treachery by conceding what is not really theirs to give?

The truth is that there is a growing consensus in Pakistani society that the state now urgently needs a new strategic consensus in the region. Moving forward on many of the 12 proposals put forward by India a month ago is only one step in the right direction. Cross-border institutional links are critical to a formula that accommodates the core concerns of both states while continuing a dialogue on other issues of pressing public concern.

There can be little disagreement as we go into the 12th Saarc summit that if the regional forum is to move forward on its multi-lateral economic agenda, it will have to work within a wider political climate of a sustained political dialogue between its two largest players over issues that can rekindle hostility anytime. Clearly, that is one fundamental truth we need to fix our gaze on if we are to create history of remaining its prisoners.

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