

India-Pakistan composite talks

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India and Pakistan are holding bilateral talks in Islamabad these days rising hopes of millions of people of the subcontinent for a better future of world's most illiterate region. Recently the two countries proposed a number of steps towards normalization of relations including a bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad on the pattern of Lahore - New Delhi Bus Service. The proposal has been widely welcomed by Kashmiris living on both sides of LoC provided India accepts presence of UN monitors on these buses.

(Both India and Pakistan have exchanged various other proposals to normalise their relations after they have experienced bitterness in the aftermath of Kargil and the attack on Indian Parliament in 2001. Both Delhi and Islamabad have been trading accusations and counter-accusations not only after Kargil but also from the very beginning i.e. the creation of these two countries in 1947. Now it has become the general mentality of policy makers in both the countries to look at each other with suspicions. They (India and Pakistan) have fought three terrible wars during the last 57 years of their existence resulting in the spread of large-scale poverty and illiteracy.

When we go through the past record of these two rivals, we find very easily that it were the vested interests in both the countries that detracted them from stepping on the path of progress and prosperity. These interests can be of elements inside and outside of these two states and needless to be mentioned because any wise person on both sides can easily visualize them. Now the question is whether there should be a bus service or not between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad?

If, Yes, then who should be allowed to travel and if no, then on what grounds? Srinagar and Muzaffarabad are two important cities of Kashmir. There was free movement of people between various parts of

such a emotional scenes that cannot be described in words. There are countless examples of this nature in all parts of Kashmir.

In the backdrop of divided and displaced families in Kashmir, a new study (Kashmiri refugees — facts, problems and way out) has been conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, by Ershad Mahmud and Khalid Rehman. Spread over hundred pages, the study takes into account various periods and phases from 1948 (when the first Kashmiri was forced to leave his/her home) in any part of his homeland and till 2003. As already mentioned Kashmiris, before 1947/1948, were free to move into any part of their territory..

The Institute of Policy Studies' research throws light on tremendous problems faced by Kashmiri refugees that were never given status of a refugee or homeless or displaced people.

Consequently the Government of Pakistan has to bear all the burden of Kashmiri refugees. For example they have been settled in various Pakistani cities and towns. Twelve seats have been allocated for them in Azad Kashmir Assembly and in Pakistan they have been given dual citizenship. A Kashmiri refugee by virtue of his dual citizenship has become speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan. The partition and division of the state of Kashmir in 1947-1948 has not only divided it geographically, but created a severe human problem as well. This is an issue of division of families. Though there is a distance of 130 kilometres between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar, but Kashmiris have to face tremendous problems in travelling via New Delhi and Lahore and reach their destination in Srinagar or Muzaffarabad. This journey sometimes takes months and in many cases years. He or she has to wait for visas in both Islamabad and New Delhi for months and years as well.

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example Srinagar is less than 150 kilometres from Muzaffarabad, but the people of these two cities are required to go through a lengthy procedure before obtaining a visa for travel between these two cities and through good luck if one succeeds in getting visa, he or she has to travel through Wagah-Atari crossing. It must be mentioned here the human aspect of this issue. Look at people of Parawa Thakiala in former Poonch state who are now residing in Nakyal area of Azad Kashmir. They belong to the same tribe, speak same language and share same cultural background, but are not allowed to meet each other.

Kashmir before 1947. For example there was a bus service Srinagar Rawalpindi Transport (SRT) that used to ply between Srinagar and Rawalpindi passing through Muzaffarabad.

There were similar more bus services between Sialkot and Jammu and so on. Munshi Muhammad Deen Fauq, a recognized Kashmiri historian in his writings after travelling in various parts of Kashmir had identified a number of routes connecting every nook and corner of Kashmir.

However, in 1947 Kashmir was divided into three parts i.e. Occupied Kashmir, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan. This was a bitter reality for a people to be prohibited from free movement in their own territory. For example Srinagar is less than 150 kilometres from Muzaffarabad, but the people of these two cities are required to go through a lengthy procedure before obtaining a visa for travel between these two cities and through good luck if one succeeds in getting visa, he or she has to travel through Wagah-Atari crossing. It must be mentioned here the human aspect of this issue. Look at people of Parawa Thakiala in former Poonch state who are now residing in Nakyal area of Azad Kashmir. They belong to the same tribe, speak same language and share same cultural background, but are not allowed to meet each other. They are not allowed to attend funerals at walking distance. A Sikh of Rawalakot met his son and other acquaintances after 56 years when he succeeded in getting a visa of Pakistan as a Yatri. This reunion presented

The authors of the study after going through miserable saga of Kashmiri refugees have given some workable suggestions. Keeping in view the present study and other relevant studies on the subject of Kashmiri refugees, it has become pertinent for both Islamabad and New Delhi to allow Kashmiris to meet freely. If Berlin Wall can be demolished, if divided Korean families can be allowed to meet occasionally, then why not Kashmiris? Recently India and Pakistan suggested some Confidence Building Measures for normalization of relations. Among these CBMs, opening of Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route is very important and it should be given top priority. Both the forces in Kashmir should monitor even border movement of Kashmiris. This will surely not hurt their (India-Pakistan) national stands and egos over Kashmir. Human aspect of Kashmir issue should be always supreme and should not be sacrificed at the altar of national standpoints at all. It has been also said that both the countries have now reached a point where they cannot afford another war, and for that it has become essential for policy makers to start with easing prevalent tensions. The Kashmir issue is a bone of contention between these two countries and if this problem is solved amicably the future of over a billion people, one-third of who are living below the poverty line, will be bright. Let us hope for a silver lining in dark clouds of the subcontinent.

The writer is a Freelance Columnist on Indo-Pak conflict.