

# A duel with Indian luminaries

Inayatullah

**M**usharraf's address to the *Indian Today Conclave 2004* via satellite and the answers he gave to questions from the floor, has certainly cleared the air about Pakistan's stand on a number of points relevant to the process of an ongoing dialogue that begun after the *January Joint Statement*.

The address was characterized by consistency, lucidity and transparency. No words were minced nor was there any hedging around the issues identified. The talk was straight and clear-cut.

Musharraf underscored the integral linkage between the confidence building measures and the dialogue itself. You "can't sprint on the *CBMs* while moving at a snail's pace on the dialogue process", he observed. There was need for *simultaneity*. The two countries could not move forward on *CBMs* without making progress on the disputes, including Kashmir.

He resolutely, clarified the vital necessity of resolving the Kashmir issue, which just could not be sidelined. As responsible nuclear weapon states, we must demonstrate to the rest of the world that we have the courage and conviction of bringing a just peace for our future generations. He made the point that it is only our failure to settle disputes ourselves that invites the third party mediation, facilitation or involvement.

Leading businessmen and senior diplomats to move ahead with economic and cultural ties placing Kashmir on a back burner put weighty arguments forward. How trade and joint ventures would open up the markets for both the countries and both will benefit tremendously. Look how adversaries like China and India are marching ahead with mutual trade already in billions of dollars and increasing. The border dispute no longer stands in the way of the two countries, having very good relations. Musharraf dealt with the point squarely. You can't equate the two disputes. India and Pakistan have been fraught with two wars on the Kashmir issue, which is recognized by the United Nations as a disputed territory. The *January Joint Statement* is anchored on the need and desirability of resolving the issue to the satisfaction of both the countries. When told how he would characterize those who tried to assassinate him: were they terrorists? Subtly relating the point to the militant activities in Kashmir. Musharraf responded by asserting that a struggle for freedom and self determination was going on in Kashmir, and the two could not be placed in the same category.

He spelt out the tremendous positive consequences of agreeing to settle the Kashmir question. And with the two countries already in possession of nuclear weapons, why can't our defence expenditure be cut down? Pakistan main-

tains a force level based on a perceived threat and a strategy of minimum deterrence. Pakistan, because of enhancement of firepower of weapons, has already reduced the strength of the army by 50,000. India has to do likewise: "your defence force levels are not based on threat but on power projection". He pointed out the latest multi-billion dollar acquisitions by India and noted the vastly enhanced budgetary allocations to defence. Pakistan, he said, would be amenable to mutual proportionate reduction of forces. Reduction in defence expenditure will mean release of funds for social sector and poverty alleviation.

**With so much happening by way of building trust and confidence and with this considerable progress towards normalization, will there be an equally serious move to settle the disputes bedevilling relations? Will Musharraf's major point and hope of simultaneity, in terms of promotion of CBMs and resolving the issues, actually materialize? To use his words, "if there is no movement towards a solution (of the Kashmir dispute) everything will fly back to square one"**

What I enjoyed the most was the way he handled the battle of wits. All the luminaries present - journalists, politicians, a leading film star, former foreign secretaries, top-notch businessmen and, of course, a most competent compere, concentrated on a single point and marshalled impressive reasons for their pleas: open up Pakistan, accelerate trade and business relations, promote cultural and media ties. Not one spoke about settling the Kashmiri dispute (except the compere who at the end did refer to it while winding up the "duel") Shekhar Gupta tried to inject other elements like the state of democracy in Pakistan. Musharraf rebutted him by saying, please don't make a point of criticizing our internal affairs. Another gentlemen sought to focus on civil liberties. He, too, got a similar advice. Why not have Indian films in Pakistan and why place restrictions on the television? Musharraf had a word or two to say about the negative approach of the cinema and

the media in India. He referred to anti Pakistan films produced by *Bollywood*.

All in all, it was quite a feat on the part of Musharraf: One man taking on the cream of India's elite intellectuals.

The question is: how will Musharraf's performance be viewed in Indian political circles? The timing of this discussion was significant. The general elections in India are about to take place. An electoral campaign is going on. Peace with Pakistan has become an important talking point on the part of BJP in this campaign. Both Vajpayee and Advani have been making conciliatory statements without moving away from their known stand on Kashmir. References are being made to the Parliamentary resolution on Kashmir which seeks to preserve the integrity of the Indian Union. While talks with Kashmiri leaders are on, the prospects for acceptance of their basic demands remain dim. The military repression, in fact, has been stepped up. And little is being done to take confidence building measures for the *Kashmiris*. No let up in operations. No reduction in the occupying forces. No release of political prisoners.

**I**n so far as *CBMs* between India and Pakistan are concerned, a lot is happening. After the restoration of railroad and airline links, Indians and Pakistanis are visiting each other in droves, signing trade *MoUs*. *SAFTA* has already been agreed to. Exchange of civil society delegations has continued. A large group of Indian writers is currently in Pakistan, led by the formidable Ajit Kaur, who along with our own redoubtable Kishwar Naheed is cooing songs of *prem* and *shanti* and highlighting our common heritage and culture. Joint theatre plays are being staged at *Al-Hamra*, in Lahore. The cricket fever has caught millions of fans on both sides. About 10,000 visas were issued to Indian visitors. The *Khokhrapar* route into Sindh is being opened.

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It is one thing to talk about linking the *CBMs* with the dialogue process and quite another to ensure it. As Kuldip Nayar put it the other day, BJP is quite capable of going back on its commitments, if it suits its interests. Let us all hope for the best.

The writer is a Lahore-based columnist  
pacade@brain.net.pk