

Changing the mindset

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RESPONDING to a question in his recent interview to the American journal *Newsweek*, the president of Pakistan pointedly said: "We are changing the entire psyche of our society which has been held hostage to extremist ideas. The entire mindset needs to be changed which we are doing."

He was expressing his view on the problems facing Pakistan in the context of the Kashmir dispute and the international environment. He could not have been more precise. The tension between Pakistan and India to a large extent appears formidable because of the people's fixed mindset.

Since the interview took place against the background of President Musharraf's meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session, what was apparently uppermost in the general's mind was the Kashmir dispute which has defied resolution for nearly 57 years.

Unfortunately, for the long period of time that the dispute has remained unresolved, the mindset of the people has become increasingly inflexible. Gen Pervez Musharraf has spoken of the need for a change in this respect more than once.

This is not to suggest that India has an open mind on the subject. For instance, to this day India continues to believe that the insurgency in Indian-occupied Kashmir is Pakistan inspired and Pakistan sponsored. On the contrary, it is now fully established that the insurgency is indigenous. A number of seasoned Kashmir-watchers have also expressed the same view.

Despite the significantly diminished scale of cross-border infiltration of the so-called terrorists into Kashmir, the insurgency has not proportionately lost its intensity.

On the Pakistani side the religious or ethnic factor in the insurgency is often over-stated. At the root is the Kashmiri people's will not to surrender their independence and lose their identity as Kashmiris.

The dominant factor in the Kashmiri demand for self-determination has been the people's will to retain their Kashmiri identity or 'Kashmiriyat' as they call

in May 1955.

However, the bilateral talks which were most promising were those which were held in 1962-63 following an outbreak of war between India and China. The western powers at no cost wanted China to gain an upper hand and despatched their respective emissaries with the objective of keeping the situation under vigilance and control.

The delegations of Pakistan and India, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Sardar Swaran Singh, held six meetings. Y.D. Gundevia, a secretary in the Indian ministry of external affairs, who was the principal aide to the Indian delegation during the talks, has given a blow-by-blow account of the meetings in his book *Outside the Archives*.

From his account, it appears that the two sides came closer than ever to a possible settlement which was broadly to consist of converting the Line of Control (LoC) with some adjustments into a permanent border. Retired Major-General D.K. Palit of the Indian army apparently had even prepared a map showing the proposed modifications in the LoC for Mr Swaran Singh's use during his private sessions with Mr Bhutto. However, at the last minute the talks broke down and there was no agreement.

The Kashmiri leader Shaikh Abdullah came to Pakistan reportedly with a mandate given by Pandit Nehru to negotiate a settlement with President Ayub Khan.

It was then believed that the outlook for peace was very promising, but then Pandit Nehru suddenly died of a heart attack and Shaikh Abdullah returned to New Delhi forthwith. Since then from time to time there have been various proposals to divide the disputed state into two separate entities, one with a pro-Pakistan complexion and the other under the influence of India.

A widely respected Indian editor, B.G. Verghese, presented a formula labelled 'Confederalism'. As described by Robert Wirsing in his detailed study of India, Pakistan and the Kashmir dispute

it. An American specialist on the Kashmir question, Robert G. Wirsing, of the University of South Carolina, has quoted "a Hindu official with lengthy service in Indian Kashmir (without naming him)" as saying that ethnicity is a major problem because Kashmiris are "unusually insular; they have a feeling of uniqueness, indeed of cultural superiority. The long struggle for self-determination establishes that they wish to preserve their identity at all costs. Unfortunately, the severe military action by the Indian authorities has given rise to an anti-Hindu feeling among the Kashmiri freedom fighters." However, Wirsing maintains that ethnicity is not an absolute barrier to cooperation against Indian rule among Muslims of differing ethnic backgrounds.

It is surprising that the Musharraf-Manmohan Singh meeting in New York has not prompted much follow-up in the Indian media. The fact the meeting was held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly may have given the impression that it was really a casual affair not meant to be taken too seriously.

In fact the meeting was something of a breakthrough. Its outcome has been received with a degree of enthusiasm (and hope) on both sides of the divide. The official Pakistani spokesman even hinted at the possibility of the two sides going beyond their 'stated positions' in their search for a resolution of the Kashmir question. He said: "The two leaders have crossed one barrier and they talked about possible options on Kashmir, which underlined the political will of the two governments to resolve the lingering dispute." Off-the-record talks between India and Pakistan have also begun, with close aides of the leaders participating in them.

British Defence Secretary Geoffrey Hoon, the precise purpose of whose shuttle diplomacy between India and Pakistan is not quite clear, has also expressed his appreciation of the India-Pakistan peace talks and enigmatically disclosed that his country was keeping an eye on the peace process.

He has also said that Britain was prepared to play a role for resolving issues between India and Pakistan. The timely sponsorship of a Pakistani journalists' group's visit to Indian occupied Kashmir by the South Asia Free Media Association has given additional momentum to the peace efforts. Nothing like this has happened before.

During the various attempts at breaking the deadlock over Kashmir, India and Pakistan have had a large number of meetings over the past half a century at various levels and in different forums.

The prime ministers of the two countries held their first meeting to break the logjam as early as July-August 1953. They met again

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(first published in the US in 1994), the Verghese plan called for conversion of the LoC following "suitable adjustments" in order to "secure a rational border, permanently demilitarized."

Verghese's plan also called for "some kind of overarching structure, maybe an informal council meeting periodically on either side to consider matters of common concern..." The plan also visualized full revitalization of the autonomy provision under the Indian Constitution Article 370.

Wirsing regards this plan as too complicated and "not too certain a route to a settlement of the Kashmir dispute." At Shimla in 1972, according to Indian experts, Mrs Indira Gandhi virtually prevailed upon Mr Bhutto to freeze the dispute and maintain a sort of permanent status quo on the basis of the LoC. Even if there was some such understanding between the two leaders, it was never formally presented in Pakistan nor became the basis of an agreement between India and Pakistan.

A great deal of hope has therefore now been placed in the efforts of President Musharraf to arrive at an agreement with India. The first step to any settlement would be demilitarization of sensitive points such as Siachen and Kargil.

Nothing has yet surfaced very clearly about the possible options mentioned by officials of both countries. Yet, a positive development is the large number of confidence-building measures (CBMs) which have been accepted by both sides. The tension between Pakistan and India appears to be slowly easing.

Ms Mehbooba Mufti, chairperson of the People's Democratic Party in the occupied state, who met Pakistani journalists in Srinagar on Tuesday, was asked what she thought could be a solution to the Kashmir problem. She said: "Both India and Pakistan should forget their ego and think of Kashmiris on both sides..." She also said the economy was the main thing which would give power; even armies do not count when it comes to strong economies. She also laid great stress on the opening of bus routes between the divided parts of the state. She has also said: "We will not allow anything to disrupt this dialogue."

Whatever is the implication of her remarks is anybody's guess.

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