

The long slog to summit

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PAKISTAN'S reaction to India's willingness to talk resembles the exhilaration of a country cousin on being invited to a town circus. Statements flowed freely and Prime Minister Jamali lost no time in inviting Prime Minister Vajpayee to Islamabad.

It is for the first time perhaps since the partition of the sub-continent that the leaders of politics, religion and professions all alike and the people of all shades of opinion belonging to all regions have rid themselves of the Indian paranoia. A reference to the core of Kashmir, however, is understandably made in all expressions of opinion.

The sole sour note struck by some Lahore industrialists that a settlement on Kashmir should come before trade quite obviously reflects more their worry about the competitiveness of their goods than their commitment to the Kashmir cause. Almost everyone, quite understandably, has cautioned the government in its euphoria against bartering away the self-determination right of the people of Kashmir.

The response of Mr Vajpayee to Mr Jamali's invitation has been, on the other hand, phlegmatic. Creating a right environment and preparation for talks would take time, has been his first reaction. The attitude of the Indian government, parties and the public ranges from condescending to negative. The foreign office spokesman did not miss mentioning "cross-border terrorism" and Pakistan not offering to open its air space to the Indian aircraft (for flights to Afghanistan).

At the adverse extremity of reaction not unexpectedly is paranoid Bal Thackeray who sees no need to normalize relations with Pakistan. His views mirror his obsessive hostility not towards Pakistan alone but also towards the Indian Muslims, and surprisingly even an educated audience in a show-of-hand vote after a debate on TV held that the present was not the right time nor were the circumstances conducive to negotiations with Pakistan.

The leadership and the people of Pakistan alike now seem to realize that the path to a settlement of the Kashmir dispute lies through amity and not hostility. Not so the Indians — the

flamboyant.

Whether it is General Zia forcing himself on India to watch cricket or Musharraf's nostalgic visit to his childhood haveli in Delhi, this relationship did not improve an iota nor did Vajpayee's bus journey to Lahore in between. Zia's cricket diplomacy made no difference either way and is all but forgotten. Vajpayee was greeted in Lahore by noisy protesters brought out on the streets by some religious, or jihadi, organizations. He had to abandon his bus at Wagah or a helicopter to carry him to Lahore. He dined at the Fort protected by armed men and smelling tear gas. Then Kargil followed whipping up war frenzy in India. Vajpayee accused Pakistan of stabbing him in the back. His popularity at home soared.

Musharraf's nostalgia was soon overtaken by the debacle at Agra. The summit held there without preparation or a formal agenda strained relations further which went on deteriorating to reach the brink of war. In the 17-month long confrontation between the two countries, the world has come to believe that India has blinked first. New Delhi is also being credited with the peace initiative to which Pakistan has responded. On both counts it is a failure of Pakistan's diplomacy.

Pakistan's persuasive efforts spread over 20 months (ever since Agra) to resume talks, and Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali's first invitation to Mr Vajpayee (all but ignored by him) seems to have made no mark at all on the world opinion. This shows Pakistan's low credibility as a nation and its image of militancy fostered by clerics and fighters who preach, or march, to kill and die. They either idealize or demonize. Moderation and tolerance are not their virtues.

India's senas and dals excel our sipahs and lashkars both in numbers and bigotry but they escape the world censure because they march and kill within India. The ruling BJP coalition, despite its Hindutva, presents an enlightened and democratic image because the Indian constitution makes no mention of Hinduism. On the other hand, the rhetoric of our clerics, the adventures of their disciples in the neighbouring and far-off lands and the official Islamic ideology bring to us no gain but cause enormous complications.

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to realize that the path to a settlement of the Kashmir dispute lies through amity and not hostility. Not so the Indians — the government and the people alike. The flutter of optimism in Pakistan thus has to be tempered with caution and patience — caution in rhetoric on Kashmir and patience in the long slog of negotiations starting with the ambassadors and going up to the prime ministers. The lessons to be learnt from the past are many and useful. The foremost is that the approach to a problem which is intractable, as Kashmir indeed is, and to a relationship which is long mired in suspicion and hate scarred by wars cannot be emotional or

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The biggest setback it has caused is the loss of support on Kashmir. Despite our protestations, the world at large, even our allies in fighting terror, remain unconvinced that Pakistan is not sending armed men across the Line of Control. Even US Secretary of State Colin Powell and his deputy Armitage, while praising Pakistan's "spectacular" role in fighting the Afghan terror, have not been able to bring themselves up to acknowledge that the armed movement across the LoC has ceased. Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri's argument — that if half a million Indian troops deployed across the Line of Control cannot check the infiltrators how can Pakistan on its side? — finds no takers. The predominant perception worldwide remains that Pakistan is not doing enough to stop infiltration.

Now that for once the national interest in Pakistan has risen high and the anguish over atrocities in Kashmir is becoming unbearable, the government, the religious parties and their jihadi outfits should speak with one voice and work together to cleanse the country's terrorist image. Only then will Pakistan earn the world support in its talks with India.

At present, the powers that matter are impelled to help not because they have determined that the cause of Kashmir is just but because they need Pakistan to fight their war against terror. After all, before September 11 most Americans viewed Pakistan as an "unstable country with a tarnished history of corrupt dictators, military coups and territorial violence along its borders."

At this critical turn in the world affairs when America with its European allies is out to subdue the defiant regimes in the Middle East and America's allies in the East feel threatened by North Korea's nuclear potential and intentions, Pakistan is in an eminent position to enlist American support for a Kashmir settlement which may not fully meet the aspirations of the people of Kashmir but may yet end their agony, and also reduce Pakistan's crushing defence burden.

Our leaders — moderate or militant — should not let this great opportunity pass. The fight for justice and human rights is unending. We will be closing just its one phase.

One last word: Diplomacy and not publicity should determine the content and course of talks with India. The prime minister should silence his many and garrulous spokesmen and advisers. That is the most important lesson to be learnt from the failure at Agra in the hopeful summer of 2001. Then too many people, including President Musharraf himself, spoke too much and too often in public.