

Bus Service

BY ABDUL RASHID MALIK

The yearning among the Kashmiris for opening of the LoC always remained.

Ever since the restoration of New Delhi-Lahore Bus service as a step being described as confidence building one, the idea of resumption of Srinagar-Rawalpindi bus service originally floated by Mufti Mohammad Saeed Chief Minister Occupied Kashmir during his election campaign and being pushed forward even today has evoked a popular support from all sections of polity in Occupied Kashmir.

Taking clue from the burning desire of the people of Kashmir divided by the Line of Control that the land route from Srinager to Rawalpindi should be opened Mufti Saeed and his daughter Mahbooba Mufti who is also the chairperson of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party are persistently calling for opening of both the old land routes i.e., Srinager to Rawalpindi and Jammu to Sialkot. These were the only two land routes providing links between the state of Jammu and Kashmir and Indian subcontinent. It was only through the treacherous Radcliffe Award the district of Gurdaspur with a Muslim population of 50.4 percent was annexed to East Punjab that India got land route to Jammu through Pathankot.

Mufti Saeed talking to newsmen on 9 August at Ranbir Singh Pura a town situated on Jammu-Sialkot border advocated the demand of soft border and said that he was in favour of opening road link from Suchetgarh (Jammu) to Sialkot and Uri (Srinagar) to Rawalpindi to facilitate visits of divided communities. Quoting the example of collapsing of wall of hatred between North and South Korea he said that people to people contacts helped bury the mutual mistrust and animosity. Mahbooba Mufti on 30 August, demanded in Srinagar "a bus service be started between the insurgency-hit state and Pakistan. Such a

measure would go a long way in the peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue and restoration of complete peace and normalcy in Occupied Kashmir". Maulana Abbas Ansari in his first statement as Chairman APHC made a demand for opening the traditional route of Srinager to Islamabad.

The idea has been endorsed by no less than a person Mir Zafarullah Jamali Prime Minister of Pakistan who in reply to a question asked to him in an hour-long programme "Aap Ki Baat BBC Key Sath" on 3 August did not rule out the extension of Delhi-Lahore bus service to Occupied and Azad Kashmir. The idea always had an enchanting appeal for the people of Kashmir and has always been exploited by leaders like Sh Abdullah and his son Dr Farooq Abdullah as a vote-catching device during the state elections.

They would entice the Kashmiris by making promises in the public meetings to open the land route if they were returned to power. However they could not fulfil the promise as it was not in the domain of their power. Dr Farooq Abdullah visited Muzaffarabad in 1973 (The family was then out of power) and to appease the sentiments of the people demanded the opening of route along the Line of Control. In May 1984 Dr Farooq Abdullah the then Chief Minister relishingly pointed out to this scribe when during his visit to Srinagar on visa he met him at his residence in Srinagar, "you had to cover a long journey through Amritsar to reach

Srinager, whereas you could make it from Muzaffarabad in two hours if the land route across the ceasefire line was opened".

Although the plea for opening the land route across the ceasefire line has always been the source of excitement among the Kashmiris it was overshadowed by the heated relations and military stand-off between the two rival countries for nearly a year. With the beginning of current romance of 'friendly relationship' ostensibly spurred by Mr Vajpayee the Indian Prime Minister by offering an olive branch in public meeting at Srinager on 18 April, followed by other cosmetic steps of restoring the High Commissioners, Delhi-Lahore bus service and frequent exchange of delegations of intellectuals, traders, parliamentarians, journalists, political figures of the status of Maulana Fazlur Rehman from Pakistan and Lalu Parsad Yadav and Ram Jathmillani from India who delivered messages of goodwill and friendship to the leadership and people of both sides, the plea has again been revived with forceful advocacy by Mufti Mohammad Saeed and Umar Farooq, the President of National Conference, the strong opposition in the Kashmir

Assembly.

The Indian government however is silent over the plea, except a tacit nod of Mir Zafarullah Jamali in his interview in the BBC programme there has not come a policy statement from Pakistan Government as well. The traffic on the normal routes from Srinager to Rawalpindi and Jammu to Sialkot was closed immediately with the eruption of Jihad on 1 August 1947. Gandhi travelled from Rawalpindi to Srinagar and after 3 days stay in Srinagar travelled back via Jammu to Sialkot.

The normal land routes were suddenly close prior to the landing of Indian forces in Srinagar. However the pedestrian traffic through continuous hilly and plain routes continued till enforcement of ceasefire in January 1949. By then Azad Kashmir was carved out and the pedestrian traffic across the ceasefire line continued with the connivance of the civil administration on both sides of the ceasefire line. This facility was enjoyed by the people on both sides till 1956 and was gradually squeezed by army vigilance. The Tashkent Agreement almost put a stop to this kind of travelling except the clandestine crossing. The Kashmiris were forced to travel between India and Pakistan on visa that too in very limited number. The yearning among the Kashmiris for opening of the LoC always remained. In Pakistan late Mir Abdul Aziz a renowned journalist of Kashmir used to project ceaselessly the inner desire of Kashmiris that LoC should be opened to traffic on both

sides. He would not mind if it could be done with visas of India and Pakistan. In 1985 Sufi Ghulam Muhammad editor daily *Srinagar Times*, a popular Urdu daily in Srinagar - during his visit to Muzaffarabad had an exhaustive interview with Sardar Abdul Qayoom the then President Azad Kashmir and asked him why he was opposing the opening of LoC to traffic. Sardar Qayoom denied opposing this provided the traffic through this route was not subjected to Indian visa like the traffic through Wagah border. He would welcome the opening of LoC to traffic with the permits issued by the civil authorities of Srinagar and Muzaffarabad.

This is the crux of the problem. It is hoped that in his vein of desire to seek normalisation of relations with India Mir Zafarullah Jamali does not lose sight of this 'crux of the problem'. Opening the LoC under Indian or Pakistan visa would be tantamount to according a status of international border like Wagah. With the upsurge of freedom struggle in Kashmir in 1989 the plea for opening of LoC to traffic had lost its significance as the gun is ruling the scene.

Now with the peace slogans emanating both from New Delhi and Islamabad Mufti Saeed with an ulterior motive of converting the struggle into a farcical peace process has found it opportune to revive the plea of opening the LoC to traffic. He aims at hoodwinking the world opinion and enticing the freedom loving people of Kashmir to the slumber of dubious peace process. If he meant that traffic could be resumed under Indian and Pakistani visa this could be a treacherous plea implying to accord LoC the status of International border like Wagah. This could be a move to satisfy the Indian designs. Pakistan and Kashmiris will never accept it.

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