

## *Kashmir at the Summit*

By Ninan Koshy

Kashmir and Kerala, perhaps the two most scenic of the Indian states, are at the northern and southern ends of the country, respectively. During his New Year holiday in Kerala, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee wrote some “musings” on Kashmir, almost as if he were “thinking aloud.” He wrote that he was determined to address seriously the Kashmir problem, which he identified as one of the bitter legacies of the partition of the subcontinent, while also recognizing both the internal and external dimensions of the issue.

Vajpayee expressed his desire to heal the Kashmiris’ wounds and negotiate seriously with Pakistan in his quest to build a new peace in the subcontinent. One hopes that Prime Minister Vajpayee will be willing and ready to make the essence of these musings the basis for a joint declaration with Pakistan’s President General Pervez Musharraf at their summit in mid-July in the historic city of Agra.

Prime Minister Vajpayee’s invitation to Pakistan’s leader for a meeting was statesman-like. General Musharraf’s prompt response accepting it was equally commendable. Maybe both leaders have their eyes on their places in history. It may be a cliché to say that one should not set expectations too high for the summit. But there is already a favorable climate in the subcontinent, among large sections of the people, for arranging a peace accord. There is a growing sense that the Kashmir problem—the complexity of which nobody underestimates—can be solved with serious effort on both sides. There is wide recognition that cooperation is necessary and possible between the two countries in many areas. The elements of a new political discourse have begun to replace the language of acrimony and hostility that has characterized much of the debate and diplomacy between the two countries. However, the reluctance of the security establishment in both

countries to learn the new language is evident and continues to be a major obstacle on the road toward peacemaking.

The fact that the voices of goodwill heard during the Lahore Summit in the spring of 1999 were soon replaced by the noises of the artillery in the Kargil Mountains is not forgotten. Nor is it forgotten that both Vajpayee and Musharraf are, in a way, beneficiaries of the Kargil conflict. The former gained some electoral advantage in the 1999 elections based on his claim of victory in the war and the latter ousted the democratically elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was widely viewed by the Pakistani military leadership as having been responsible for Pakistan’s defeat. Ironically, India is the first country that General Musharraf will visit after elevating himself to the presidency. It is the one that has been the most vocal in questioning his legitimacy and had previously refused to deal with him.

At one point the Pakistan leader stated that pressure from the United States persuaded India to initiate the summit. That statement was quickly withdrawn after eliciting hostile reactions from India. Since India and Pakistan became overtly nuclear states, India has been keen to underplay or even deny the increasingly prominent role of the United States in the Kashmir issue. Clearly, both India and Pakistan are vulnerable to U.S. pressures and preferences. Rather than acknowledging the strong U.S. pressure, India prefers to present itself as a responsible and independent regional power that is willing to engage in dialogue with its neighbor, while downplaying the influence of its new friend, ally, and nuclear partner.

Although there is no structured agenda for the summit, the Kashmir issue will certainly be a central issue. If a road map to peace is to be found, both countries will need to make sub-

stantial compromises. Will Pakistan agree to a solution other than holding a plebiscite? Will it stop the moral, political, and military support of militants in Kashmir that that has also led to terrorism? Is India going to hold to its position that the territory of Jammu and Kashmir is “an integral part of India”—a stance repeated by India even during the build-up to the Summit?

The time has come for India to go beyond its rhetorical references to its national constitution and seek fresh ground by breaking free of the old paradigms of Indo-Pakistani relations. However, compromising does not mean doling out concessions to the other country. Ultimately, it means doing what’s in the best interest of each nation. Both leaders should take the hard steps necessary to settle the Kashmir issue. India should recognize what a great liability the Kashmir problem has been—both for the welfare of the Indian people and for India’s reputation on the world stage. The search for a final solution to the Kashmir dispute is fundamentally in India’s own interest—not a favor to Pakistan.

There can be a meaningful solution to the Kashmir problem only when representatives of Kashmir on both

sides of the Line of Control are considered legitimate participants in negotiating a settlement—rather than being regarded as bargaining chips. Finding the modalities for such participation will be a major challenge for the summit.

Anti-India sentiment within Kashmir and violence in the Kashmir Valley will not go away just because of Pakistan’s change of policy. India’s obsession with Pakistan and cross-border terrorism is partly a delusion that hides the internal causes of conflict. There’s no denying that Pakistan has contributed to violence in Kashmir, but the roots of the tensions lie within Kashmir. Meanwhile, the situation inside Kashmir continues to deteriorate as a result of rampant human rights violations by Indian security forces (national and local), creating new levels of popular discontent.

All sorts of proposals about a final settlement on Kashmir are being floated. A proposal receiving much attention is one that has been advanced by a think-tank claiming high connections in the two countries and the United States. This suggests a trifurcation of the disputed area—with Jammu and Ladakh remaining in India and “Azad” Kashmir coming

under Pakistani control together with some other innovative arrangements, including either diluted Indian sovereignty or political division of the Kashmir Valley. Considerable weight is given to another proposal described in the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn*, which reported: “There is a strong policy interest in Delhi which is willing to accept a solution to Kashmir short of its absorption in the Indian Union. If both sides of Kashmir are granted autonomy, with the leaders of Kashmir joining hands to support a transit point of healthy diplomatic and trade interaction between India and Pakistan, Delhi may be happy with this arrangement.”

Whatever the eventual proposal, it is likely to be preceded by accepting the Line of Control as a medium-term measure and instituting arrangements that will soften the de facto boundary line and thus serve to unify the social and economic life of Kashmir.

*(Ninan Koshy <knkoshy@vsnl.com>, an Indian analyst, is the former director of International Affairs, World Council of Churches and visiting fellow at the Human Rights Program, Harvard Law School.)*

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