

The Kashmir Crisis: What Are Our Options?

by
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THE present crisis in Kashmir has caused widespread anxiety all over India. However, the main stream political responses I have been such as to worsen the situation progressively rather than bridge the ‘growing communication gap between Kashmir and the rest of India. These responses can be briefly summarised as follows:

1. Deny that Kashmiris have any justified grievances that must be resolved jived with the Centre and attribute the crisis to a resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism.

2. Refuse to acknowledge that terrorist violence is directed as much against Muslims as it is against Hindus.

3. Put all the blame on Pakistani interference for the disaffection, bloodshed and violence in Kashmir. Deny that the basic issues that must be resolved are questions of internal political choices.

4. Impose a massive military repression in Kashmir that is willing to use its weapons without careful consideration of the various alternatives, and of the consequences of alienating those who might be seeking some compromise solution.

5. Continue to mindlessly chant slogans about the unity and-integrity of India that only stifle any voices seeking to come to a peaceful settlement. Shout in a louder and louder voice that Kashmir must stay within India on the same or more stringent terms whatever the consequences.

6. Demand that the government

unilaterally abrogate Article 370 which gave some limited autonomy to Kashmir, Justify this by asserting that Article 370 is the cause of the present conflict.

The Facts of the Crisis

1. The crisis in Kashmir is a result of the longstanding failure to implement a democratic system allowing for local self governance. Pakistan is undoubtedly, by its help to the militants, adding fuel to the fire. But the crisis is our own creation, just as the disaffection of Bangladeshis from the Pakistani government was not of was not of India’s creation, nor was the ethnic uprising by Tamils in Sri Lanka of India’s creation. Our interventions in both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh went far beyond the kind of help the Pakistani government is providing the Kashmiri militants. In both cases the Indian government provided not only training bases, technical support, arms, and other material and moral help, but even armed intervention. Yet the conflicts were engendered by the failure of Sri Lanka and Pakistan to work out a satisfactory solution for meeting the social and political aspirations of under represented ethnic communities within a restructured, democratic, federal polity. It is the same in Kashmir. Even if Pakistan ceased to interfere, or even if it ceased to exist, the conflict in Kashmir would not disappear.

Governments which try to put a military lid on the rights of ethnic groups to representation and a prominent voice in decentralised local decision making frequently have to end up facing them at some point in the form of virulent

conflicts. For example, we can now observe a similar large scale outburst by various ethnic groups in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe.

2. Indian forces in Kashmir are behaving as though they are an occupying army on alien territory rather than dealing with an outburst of discontent and violence within India’s own boundaries. According to Balraj Puri, a Jammu based political worker, “Performance of the security forces, measured in terms of a comparable period has perhaps no parallel in independent India.” The policy of repression has only alienated the Kashmiri people more and strengthened the forces of secessionism. Democracy will find it difficult to survive in the rest of India if our security forces are left without proper civilian direction, end up running amok in this fashion and remain unaccountable to normal legal standards by hiding behind the excuse of “national security”

3. Kashmir is not merely a geo-political problem, as it is primarily viewed by the government bureaucrats. It is a land inhabited by a group of people with a complex history and relationship to the rest of India. Those who talk of keeping Kashmir part of India under the same or more stringent terms as at present *at all costs* should not be allowed to forget that it can only be done at the unacceptable cost of exterminating the bulk of its population. And short of such a horrendous measure, negotiations for a settlement acceptable to both sides can

only be initiated if we have the good sense and courage to take steps to remove the sense of injustice that the majority of the Kashmiri people have harboured for so long.

4) The cause of the alienation of the Kashmiri people is not the existence of Article 370 but the fact that this Article, promising a certain degree of autonomy to Kashmir, has never really been put into effect. The Kashmiri people far from enjoying any "special" status or rights, have not even been allowed the political rights available to other Indian, for example those living in UP or Bihar. For long periods they were even denied the right to freely elect their state government. In those rare periods that democratically elected governments were in place, the central government seldom allowed them to function. Most

elections (with the exception of that of 1977) have not been free or fair. In the past. Central rule, has often been imposed precipitously, without clear justification. The Centre denied legitimate democratic outlets for the political aspirations of the Kashmiri people, conniving with local power brokers to fix elections; the discontent has finally erupted in the form of terrorism.

5. Despite being predominately Muslim, the Kashmiri people showed no inclination to join Pakistan at the time of Partition. They were more concerned about safeguarding their Kashmiri identity which they sought to do by entering into an agreement through Article 370 with the Indian government. We failed to honour that promise. As a result of the callous disregard by the

Indian government of the problems of Kashmiris certain militant Kashmiri groups are gravitating toward Pakistan. It is indeed tragic that these militants should be pushed into seeking support from Pakistan at a time when that country is seriously riven by internal ethnic disputes and violence. Pakistan has been unable to work out a satisfactory politics for resolving ethnic conflicts between Sindhis, Punjabis, Pathans, Mohajirs, Baluchis and others. It is unlikely that a few million Kashmiris will be able to secure their own minority rights and identity within such a murderous struggle. By indulging in brutal repression and failing to evolve a workable policy for incorporating legitimate ethnic aspirations within a decentralised polity more responsive to local needs, the Indian government is

CRPF men carrying out a search in downtown Srinagar



Going Back to More Civilised Warfare

When watching the war episodes on the television serial taken from the epic Mahabharat, I was struck by how much more uncivilised modern warfare has become. The Mahabharat depicts a well worked out, sophisticated, and honourable code of warfare. For example, war is not permitted to be carried on beyond the mutually agreed time. It starts with sunrise and must end at sunset. Surprise attacks on the sleeping enemy are not permitted. Attempts to cheat on the enemy, especially attacks on an unarmed opponent, are severely condemned. Those who defy such a code are clearly reprimanded and seen as deviating from the path of dharma, even when the righteous Pandavas do it on occasion.

For example, when, at the request of Krishna, the Pandavas are shown winning the war by making Yudhisthir utter a lie, the voices of Condemnation are strong and severe and do not spare Krishna himself even though he is god. What is more important is that Yudhisthir is forever ashamed of this act and does not forgive himself for blemishing his lifelong commitment to truth with this one falsehood.

Throughout the severest of wars, the leaders of the two sides keep the sense of being related to each other by unseverable bonds and 'continue to share each other's grief and sorrow as warrior after warrior falls on either side. They even come to mourn each other's dead. Underlying this ethical code is the philosophy that enemies are not permanent. Very often it is chance which determines on which side of the fence one ends up being placed.

The war is clearly between the two sets of contenders for political power and is not supposed to extend to feelings of enmity between their respective peoples, even though both sides mobilise soldiers to fight along with them, not on their behalf.

Today, however, modern rulers seek to poison the minds of entire peoples with fear and hatred of those with whom they may not have any contact or conflict at all. They begin by teaching their citizens to consider everyone on the other side of an arbitrarily drawn border as a real or potential enemy, even if they be their own blood relations. The entire population is required to prove its loyalty to the nation by mindlessly hating and mistrusting every human being on the other side of the border, those death and destruction are supposed to be cause for pride and celebration.

In earlier times, when war, by and large, involved the direct participation of the rulers and generals for whose gain it was fought, the glorification of martial heroism, as exemplified in Arjun or Dronacharya, had some basis in fact, since kings and

generals led their armies into battle, risking their lives in the process.

Modern rulers, how ever have devised less responsible and more cowardly ways of fighting wars. They themselves sit in air conditioned offices and send others to death and destruction, attack the lives and personal possessions of unarmed civilians, destroying even hospitals and schools with their deadly bombs and weapons operated by hired soldiers, taking little risk with their own lives.

Yet, since ideology lags behind technology, the cult of war continues to be couched in the inappropriate idiom of martial heroism. If BJP leaders in India talk of a war to wipe out Pakistan, or Benazir Bhutto makes a hysterical statement about a thousand year war, they are supposed to be displaying courage and proving their patriotic credentials. In fact, they are doing neither. Modern war requires no courage at all from the rulers. If a war were to take place, the risk to life would be taken not by prime ministers and politicians, but by low ranking soldiers and their families, unarmed civilians in border areas and, later on, except for the usually well protected rulers, all the people of the country in the target areas. The rulers' so-called patriotism does not involve love for the well-being of their fellow countrypeople. Instead, they are risking and impoverishing the lives of their people in the pursuit of a ruler's power games. Control over territory for their own aggrandisement is more important to them than the well-being of their own people.

It is time we changed the rules of the game and evolved more civilised norms learning from epic battles such as those described in the Mahabharat.

1. A more civilised war would be one in which the politicians and generals and all the others who are in favour of war would go to a demarcated battleground and fight it out with weapons which are not allowed to destroy anything or anyone beyond the battleground.

2. If they trespass beyond the designated area, they will be declared "out" by impartial international observers.

3. Citizens will be allowed to watch these combats as they do boxing and football matches.

4. All other forms of arms except those that can be used for direct combat between directly facing fighters shall be destroyed.

5. All weapons research which involves distant targets shall be banned, and those indulging in it will be tried for genocide.

If the political bosses know their own lives are at stake, they are less likely to indulge in irresponsible warmongering.



actually pushing the Kashmiris to seek support from Pakistan, even though it does so in the name of defending national integrity.

6. Hindu chauvinist organisations are lending a communal colour to the conflict by depicting the confrontation with the Centre as a resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism. When the people of Andhra Pradesh or Bengal protest against the undemocratic politics being pursued by the Central government they are not dubbed as dangerous antinationals for challenging an authoritarian, incompetent, overcentralised polity represented by the Delhi *durbar*; and for asserting regional aspirations demanding a more decentralised federal polity. But when Sikhs in Punjab or Kashmiris or Nagas raise similar demands, these are instantly and automatically depicted as “antinational” demands simply because those raising them happen to be Sikhs, Muslims or Christians living in border areas facing neighbouring countries with whom we have foolishly failed to conclude final border settlement. The implication of this strategy is that the right to oppose the wrong policies of the Central government is to be confined to the majority community of Hindus. This allows the Centre to justify repression of the democratic urges of the minorities, thereby pushing these groups to seek violent outlets for their demands.

The Kashmir upsurge is no more pro-Pakistan than the Bangladeshi or Tamilian upsurges were pro-India.

The Consequences of the Present Policy

1. By following a policy of mindless repression we are actively legitimising the violent and inhuman means adopted by the Kashmiri terrorists. Our Brutal response to their protest against years

of callous neglect if their grievances will drive even most reluctant and peace loving Kashmiris to side with the terrorists instead of isolating them. Terrorist killing of innocent people, or those who merely hold different political views, would ordinarily cause revision against their methods. But our callous response has only led to further alienation of the Kashmiri people.

The handling of the funeral procession of Mirwaiz Maulvi Farooq, who was killed by the terrorists, is symbolic of the disastrous policy that the Indian government is following in Kashmir. By killing about 50 mourners in the funeral procession the CRPF managed to divert the wrath of many Kashmiris away from the terrorist violence and focus it on the Centre.

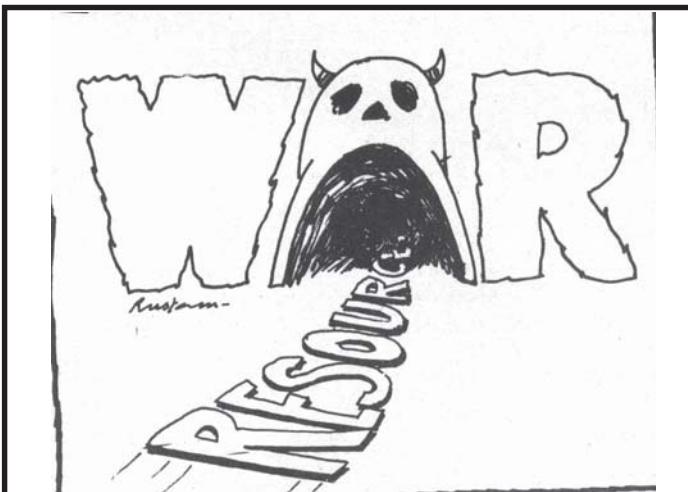
However, if the Indian government were to respond with understanding and restraint, it would be easier to isolate the terrorists, for they were beginning to take simple freedoms away from the Kashmiri people as shown in their repressive

Such a policy is extremely costly in lives and political options foregone, and is not likely to work in the long run. It will only make the conflict more resistant to an acceptable solution, and make the eventual political negotiations leading to a resolution that much more difficult.

3. By dubbing it as a Muslim problem, we thereby strengthen the communal forces in our country and make Muslims elsewhere in India feel more fearful and insecure. The not so veiled threats implied in oft repeated statements like, “If Kashmir secedes, Muslims won’t be safe in the rest of India” have already done much damage to Muslims who would then be forced to see themselves as hostages in India. This atmosphere of mistrust and fear is a dangerous blow to the survival of democracy in India. If the cult of repression and violence as the method of choice in dealing with minorities continues to get legitimacy, as is slowly happening, the snuffing out of the democratic rights of all of us will not be far behind.

4. By denying the legitimate political aspirations of Kashmiris through genuine decentralisation and regional autonomy, we are making it more difficult for the people of Jammu and Ladakh to have a measure of autonomy for themselves. By compelling them to look to the Central government for protection, we are taking them further away from an assertion of their democratic rights. Just as Kashmiris resent being governed by the Delhi *durbar*, people in Jammu and

Ladakh rightly resent being governed by a clique in Srinagar, while being left with no rights of local self governance. The solution lies in granting multiered regional autonomy which involves freeing Srinagar from the tutelage of Delhi on issues of direct local importance, and Jammu and Ladakh in the same measure. From the tutelage of



policies, such as forcible closure of cinema halls and insistence on certain modes of dress and behaviour for women.

2. By attempting to keep Kashmiris with India through almost total reliance on the armed forces we are merely prolonging the violence and danger of warfare, and aggravating its bitterness.

Srinagar. 5. Seeking to blame the 'foreign hand' for all our major political crises, as our leaders are prone to do, is making us paranoid and irresponsible as a people. Instead of mustering the courage and wisdom to have confidence in the strength of our democratic political system, while at the same time identifying the faults and shortcomings in our polity that require remedy and the working out of effective solutions, we are becoming cowardly and ineffectual in refusing to own up to being responsible for our own mistakes. This has helped foster a siege mentality in large sections of our population, especially the educated elite, as well as among our rulers. Politics born out of fear, especially when the situation is not being accurately read, inevitably lacks foresight and good sense and leads to disasters.

6. The rhetoric of hostility born out of hatred and fear of Pakistan makes the rulers and the elite in Pakistan become even more extreme in their belligerence because they are presiding over a far more fragile nation state than ours, a state coming apart on many levels. Despite desperate attempts at fostering of the religious bond as the cementing force for the nation Paki-stanis have been unable to forge a common identity. Different ethnic groups within Pakistan are locked in violent battles with each other and with their government. Their fear that they may not be able to hold together as a nation may be far more realistic than are India's similar fears. Our belligerent tit for tat responses will only help the Pakistani rulers in their attempts to bring their feuding peoples together by artificial bonding to fight their common enemy, India. Despite serious problems in Kashmir and Punjab, India has done a much better job than most countries in evolving a democratic polity, in meeting the aspirations of several of its ethnic components. For example, consider the creation of the linguistically based states which succeeded in assuaging some of the major groups in India. Let us not allow some of our insecure leaders to surrender



the strengths of our political system in an attempt to compete with the insecurity of Pakistani leaders.

7. Given that India and Pakistan both possess nuclear weapons, the hostile rhetoric currently escalating might trigger off a war in which nuclear weapons might easily come to be used, given the mood of desperation of some of the leaders in both countries. The consequences of a nuclear war will be unprecedented death and destruction. The ultimate result would be universal misery among the survivors and the collapse of two devastated economies. Even if we were to win such a war (whatever that might mean territorial expansion would only mean more disgruntled people added to our population, thus increasing, not decreasing, our political and social vulnerability.

Even if War is Averted

Continuing with the currently prevalent jingoistic rhetoric being used by both sides is bound to have long term adverse consequences. Some of them are already visible:

1. Both governments are openly declaring further escalations in already vast military expenditures. In India we had with difficulty reached a point when the Congress government felt constrained to halt the sharp escalations of the last two decades in the defence budget. But Mr V.P. Singh, who came to power on a mandate of giving higher priority to the provision of basic needs for the people, does not today feel

embarrassed to condemn the previous government for what he terms its "weakness" in freezing the defence budget. He now proposes to raise the defence budget even further.

In 1961, before the war with China, India's military budget was barely Rs 250 crores. By 1965-66, following the Indo China war, it had gone up to Rs 1,200 crores. The budget doubled in the decade after war with Pakistan. In 1975-76 it had mounted to Rs 2,400 crores. In 1985-86 it was Rs 8,000 crores. And for 1991 the estimate is about Rs 16,000 crores. And these are merely the declared expenditures in the military budget. There is a great deal of related expenditure such as on weapons and space research, BHEL, and Hindustan Aeronautics, which is not included in the sums declared as part of the defence budget. According to some estimates, the cost of a brief war with Pakistan will be around Rs. 300,000 crores. The cost of war per day will be more than what we were spending on the military in a whole year in 1961.

2. The people who benefit most from escalating military expenditure are international arms manufacturers and traders, mostly based in the West, and politicians who receive kick-backs for such import deals. The Western armament industry is playing a key part in fuelling a diabolical armsrace in the third world as they find their markets shrinking in the West with the end of the cold war. Therefore, they are seeking to shift the arena of war to the third world. This is the latest face of imperialism; in some ways it is as much more deadly than earlier versions. According to noted economist Dr Minhas, India's foreign debt stands at Rs 85,000 crores, of which a major part was incurred on defence and defence related imports. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the European powers fought their battles in Asia using mostly Asian soldiers with the aim of draining economic resources out of the colonies to Europe. Today, the Asian powers fight each other and willing spend their scarce resources on

buying arms from the West primarily to kill off Asian peoples, and to impoverish their own peoples. Unfortunately, they are able to get away with their deadly power games by invoking the slogan of "national security and honour." The bloody war between Iran and Iraq is one of many such examples of the irresponsibility of power hunger political leaders in third world countries.

3. This draining of our limited resources has cost us dearly in terms of people's well being. Currently, we spend a measly Rs 2,000 crores on education, public health, sanitation, water and housing combined. As a consequence, millions are without health care, and malnourished. Even basic health care services are lacking in most parts of rural India. We have one of the highest maternal and infant mortality rates in the world, hundreds of thousands of villages do not have access to clean drinking water, about 75 percent of the females and almost half of the males in India are not able to read and write; about half the population lives below the poverty line. Millions die each year from easily preventable diseases. Women, especially among the more deprived sections of the population, inevitably suffer most from the lack of basic necessities such as food, water, fuel, health care, housing. They pay the price with their health and, all too often, their very lives. The situation in Pakistan is somewhat worse, not better.

The continuing deprivation of our people is integrally related to the needlessly high expenditures on arms, supposedly to defend those same people. According to Dr Minhas, if we were to spend one third of our current defence budget on providing primary health care, we could easily solve many of the problems of poor health within a decade. But if we continue with the war rhetoric,

the endless escalations of the defence budget, our people will be denied the possibility of our implementing an effective war on ill health, illiteracy and poverty for the foreseeable future.

4. Any society that begins to glorify militarisation, inevitably leads to further devaluation of female lives. The status of women in weapon mongering and martial communities and societies is generally much lower than in societies that value peace and have respect for life.

5. The increasing anti Pakistan sentiment will inevitably lead to increasing the antiMuslim sentiment in our society, leading to further escalation of communal violence and massacres. The two hatreds will combine to strengthen our country's siege mentality and aggravate our insecurities. Such an atmosphere is very destructive for women's rights. We have already witnessed how the struggle for Muslim women's rights suffered a major setback with the anti-Muslim hysteria generated in the wake of the Shah Bano controversy. We are also witnessing how

Kashmiri women, who had no tradition of veiling, are taking to wearing of the *burqa*, goaded by certain religious fundamentalist sections of the militants. The cry of "community in danger" usually acts as a powerful force in further enslaving women. Likewise, the cry of "nation in danger" will only expand the scope and hold of those forces that wish to limit the role of women to that of willing martyrs in fights between different groups of men.

What Needs to be Done

Yet, unfortunately, there is little evidence of women having opposed such warfare on any significant scale though women's own interests are harmed by violence and warmongering militarisation, we have so far fail to oppose it in an organised manner because we have not fully learnt to recognise and value our own interest as distinct from those of the powerful male elite of our own community of country. This is an important hallmark of our oppression. As with too many other oppressed groups, we tend to mistakenly identify as our own interests the interests of those who have power over us. Yet, in the interest of our own survival, we cannot give up the hope and vision of Mahatma Gandhi that "in the war against war women of the world, will and should lead. It is their special vocation and privilege." We, therefore, appeal to women in India to take the lead in persuading the ruling party and the government to take the following steps:

1. Stop aiding and abetting terrorist politics in various opposition ruled states for short term political gains. This has been a regular practice of our rulers for many years not only in Kashmir but also, for example, in Punjab and Assam

2. Prove its commitment to opposing the politics of terrorism by publicly resolving not to use the same tactic they used



previously in Sri Lanka with the LTTE, and other neighbouring countries.

3. Stop using the language of hostilities and persuade Pakistan through diplomatic efforts to come to the negotiating table to sort out bilateral problems in the spirit of the Simla Agreement.

4. Instead of engaging in routine skirmishes on the border to keep the tension leve high and shooting down so called intruders, unilaterally open the borders to ordinary people of neighbouring countries and allow for a free flow of people to promote an atmosphere of regional cooperation. If Europe can end its cold war despite a much more frequent and quite murderous history of conflict and two world wars of incredible destruction, it should be relatively easier for India and Pakistan to settle their differences; they have only one major trauma to deal with Partition.

A freer interaction will dispel some of the misplaced fears of each other and allow us to take part as *equal partners* in the rich culture and civilisation of the subcontinent.

5. Work out a genuinely federal decentralised structure that actually functions and will allow various ethnic identities to obtain their fair share of economic and political power. This requires the dismantling of the currently prevalent authoritarian and over centralised system of governance which was devised essentially to meet the requirements of British imperial rule.

6. Learn to arrive at negotiated settlements with disgruntled sections of the population. Recognise that in multiethnic, diverse societies, such as those that prevail on the subcontinent, open expression of discontent and demands for a fair sharing of power are healthy signs for any democracy. Therefore, our government must learn

not to respond with panic when such demands are made. If each group gets a fair hearing under mutually accepted and adhered to procedures in good time the aggrieved groups will not feel pushed toward more desperate and violent forms of protest.

7. Curtail the ever increasing vast defence budgets and direct resources toward defending the Indian people from disease, malnutrition, homelessness, and illiteracy.

A genuinely secular, more decentralised and federal India, in which ethnic and religious identities are recognised and have a legitimate part to play, so long as they do not restrict a citizen's basic rights, is bound to arouse sympathetic echoes in Pakistan, possibly leading to restructuring the subcontinent in a more rational, civilised and humane way, providing a useful framework within which problems like Kashmir can be peacefully resolved.

Kashmiri migrants at a refugee camp in Delhi, April 1990

