

Averting a repeat of 1947....A plea

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Blunt realism can lead one to the depths of darkness and despair, idealism invariably provides scope for hope…

Indeed, it’s time for people in Jammu and the Valley to trade in their verminous polemics and self-destructing demeanour to prepare for the lofty heights of economic dynamism, communal cohesion and environmental revitalisation. Meanwhile, the governments of India and Pakistan should each swallow an ample dose of sober medication and realise it’s time to confess; “We tried for almost 61 years to control the tempo, fracture the identity and dictate the destiny of Kashmir: We’re terribly sorry, it hasn’t worked out well for any of us, not least because we attempted to defy nature: It’s over to you folks, we both hereby concede that you’re more than capable of reversing the mess we’ve put you in.”

(An imaginery and quite wishful quote no doubt - but to paraphrase the venerable Kashmiri pandit film-maker Sanjay Kak…”The obnoxious silence has to break.”)

Background

The Kashmiri people, be they Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Buddhist; are an incredibly accommodating lot. Judging by how they’ve overlooked and tolerated the rule of ‘outsiders’ in these past few centuries; functioning as a tug of the pernicious post ‘47 two-nation theory was an absolute given. Pakistan tried in earnest to make the Muslim much more of a Muslim than he needed to be while India gradually did much the same to the Hindu. Where did that leave the poor Hindus in Pakistan or the hapless Muslims in India? Marooned in their very own ancestral abode!

The millions of
 ‘desis’ that had been forcibly uprooted from either side of the un-natural divide, found it excruciatingly difficult to come to terms with the loss of their loved ones, left behind or killed in cold-blooded communal frenzy. The Sikh of Rawalpindi (undivided India and post partition Pakistan) who escaped with his bare life to Jalandhar (India), didn’t merely change his address in the Punjab, it was a blood-soaked divided Punjab. His centuries old identity and ancestral roots were ripped in exchange for a new identity, which defined his roots as enemy territory. The Muslim from pre-‘47 Agra (India) led a contorted existence in Karachi (Pakistan), her family members who didn’t migrate with her became her nascent nation’s enemies.

As the decades passed by, progress and development for India and Pakistan was a laborious struggle. Amongst other factors, unprecedented population growth and unhealthy military expenditure made post-colonial restructuring nigh on impossible for both countries. Whilst poverty in the region rippled; education, health and infrastructure were coldly sacrificed. Intellectual and artistic advancement was and still is sadly, deemed a luxury, ill-affordable to a pair of overly paranoid nation states.

Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India were an existential threat to each other and so sermonised Doordarshan and PTV, not to forget Radio Pakistan or All-India Radio. Their favourite playground for battle was of course Kashmir, attrition after attrition. The intelligence agencies of India and Pakistan, in conjunction with local lackeys; ensured that the Kashmiris were forever obliging hosts. Dissension or god-forbid obstruction was never an option. Pakistan’s “Jugular Vein” (Shah Ragh-Urdu) and India’s “Integral Part” (Atoot Ang-Hindi) were loaded oxymorons that quite literally made morons of the Kashmiri mentality.

Setting aside the moral liability of nuclearisation for just a moment, 1998 was a year of technological accomplishment for the region. Both countries demonstrated vigour to defy the “International Community”. Nevertheless, Kashmir as an issue that accompanied the creation of Pakistan and independence of a crippled India, was the perfect binary foil that prevented the “International Community” from prolonging it’s dismay. The “Islamic” and “Hindu” bombs were here to stay.

1999 and Kargil's

fiasco; followed by 9/11 have mercifully in retrospect, changed the modus operandi, if not modus vivendi, from the proverbial 'war-war' to 'jaw-jaw'.

Dialogue and

communication as a means of conflict resolution, is not only plausible, efficient, cost-effective and positively natural. For Kashmiris of whatever persuasion, it's the only possible method, an alternative simply did not and will not exist.

It would be far too rich and ludicrous for either India or Pakistan

to suggest any indigeneous provocation of violence. Contrary to what some Kashmiris and others have suggested, there is little evidence of any of the many ethnicities in Kashmir espousing martial instincts.

Moving on to the

'irreversible Peace Process' initiated in January 2004; this has thankfully proven to be the freshest of fresh airs since 1947. Both entities have shown an element of maturity and resolve, tit-for-tat provocations notwithstanding. Dialogue between Indian and Pakistani civil society has invoked and propelled fresh thinking as well as nostalgia of an un-divided past. Ruefully, at the insistence of both countries, most of this 'dialogue' has taken place outside the region in the wider 'International Community'. Both governments still feel it un-nerving and unsafe for barrier-breaking intra-dialogue and initiatives to take root in the region.

Of utter

frustration to the Kashmiri is that any peace dividends that have accrued so far have been primarily gobbled up by the Indian and Pakistani national. Movement between the two countries has increased exponentially while between the two parts of Kashmir, it's still barely a trickle. The contrast is startling if one considers that many 'well-connected' Indians and Pakistanis have travelled to each other's country on numerous occasions and at will, to 'merry-make' while there are ample Kashmiris belonging to divided families, who have yet to meet their siblings after 61 years!

Intra-Kashmir

movement and dialogue, though unprecedented has been lacklustre to say the least. By extension, reference may be extended to economic activity, cultural interaction, administrative reform and well…the list is endless. In short, India and Pakistan have not kept pace with global socio-economic/geo-political changes: Elements of an 'Iron Curtain' reminiscent of the 'Cold War' are starkly evident, particularly in Kashmir. Their respective administrative mechanisms are not quite equipped or even focused on speeding things up, both having a tendency of getting bogged down in inevitable cul-de-sacs. Old habits do die hard!

A bit of historical perspective

It's an indisputable fact that pre-colonial India was an economic powerhouse of global proportion (in relative terms, way ahead of its current trajectory) and a fabulous specimen of world-class culture and art; driven by an amazing array of diversity in food, clothes, language and construction; organised and administered by a harmonious fusion of Hindu/Muslim spirit.

Ideas, people, goods and services in whatever dimension flowed freely. If an artisan of Attock (NWFP/Punjab-Pakistan) decided one day that he wished to venture East for work; his destination may well have been no less than modern day Myanmar; traversing the breadth of modern day Pakistan, India and Bangladesh; others of his ilk had little hesitation in setting up home en-route, if a place took their fancy; indeed, Tagore's "The Kabuli Wallah" fails to escape reminiscence.

Symptoms

In its current collective predicament and despite modern advancement in transport and information networks, the region has poisoned itself with a mad concoction of Westphalia and inappropriate religious fuel, amidst a rotten basket of other self-inflicted ills. As a consequence, entities within the historic "whole", repeatedly fail to recognise the humane aspirations of those it has been programmed to categorise as the "other"; this blinds it from visualising the stupendous potential; that a harmonised region with an efficient governing structure can deliver.

Pakistan and India, despite their vast potential, have cultivated fractured societies with fault-lines in every direction. Pro & anti-US, extremist-moderate, local-national, Muslim-Hindu, pro-establishment & anti, Punjabi-Other, progressive-traditional, spiritual-material, Aryan-Dravidian even etc etc. Though both are unanimous on progress, they are blinkered on any form of reform or revision: In the meantime, those who consider themselves victimised and/or isolated, are screaming out for recognition and opportunity.

A major irritant is

the glut of misinformation that public opinion is subjected to. There is only one way to make democracy work: to provide accurate, unbiased information and contextual education, particularly of our common history.

An example from another tormented region may be apt: Alan Hart is a seasoned British journalist with arguably unrivalled exposure to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The following is an excerpt from an interview he gave to [worldpress.org](http://www.worldpress.org) last month.

url reference> <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/3206.cfm>

“Most citizens throughout the Judeo-Christian world are totally ignorant about the truth of history. I'm a classic example. I came out of my mother's womb conditioned by Zionism's version of history. It took me 12 to 15 years of being an ITN TV reporter to actually get to the other side of the story. I can understand how people who didn't have my exposure to it don't challenge.”

The Kashmiris are akin to being stuck in a sardine can, compelled to either defer to India or Pakistan. Lack of freedom to evolve their own identity, traps them in the communal mess that we repeatedly witness.

Fears

The current crisis in Indian-administered Kashmir has the un-needed potential of repeating the horrors of 1947. The symptoms are all clearly visible. There is ample human potential in the region, forever un-utilised and repressed; conditions perfect for dancing towards collective doom.

The peace process at it's current pace is blatantly ill-equipped to neutralise the situation. India and Pakistan simply do not have the requisite time or the broad strategy necessary to solve a problem which has thus far, exasperated them and caused an unwanted shift of focus from their respective schedules. If anything, a hands-on approach on their part could exacerbate the tension. When people are suffocating on one side (Valley) and lava-laden on the other (Jammu), military

instruction/obstruction or 'intelligent' manipulation could cause an uncontrollable eruption.

There is ample

evidence to suggest that Muslims in Indian-administered Kashmir are galvanising and by extension contemplating isolation of the minority Hindu community. As death tolls rise and economic activity on the Jammu road from the Valley dwindles to a complete halt, consequential blocking of India's only surface route in and out of Kashmir, could be a precursor to a communal division of the state. Anathema for the construction of a global 'super-power', forever exposing the region to become servile to the machinations of 'others'.

Recommendations

Solidifying the

whole region; not on communal lines but by re-aligning diversity to the whole region. Pakistan and India need to get over the idea of restricting movement via borders and imposing separate identities. It is important for both to not come across as inveterate narcissists who do not like to be crossed. They should provide an historic opportunity for Kashmiris to demonstrate how calmly they can, through penetrating dialogue and inspiring initiative, solve problems that have afflicted the State. This will change the perception of seeing the Kashmiris as a liability to witnessing them as a force that cements the region together.

Thus far, political

rhetoric alluding to some of the above has not been translated into practice. Those who can instigate a change in approach are metaphorically tied in chains e.g writers, artists, activists and other energetic members of civil society. Whereas, lackadaisical technocrats and bureaucrats, wearing the badge of either country are given the duty of enacting the rhetoric.

That doesn't work.

It raises false hopes at best and repeatedly exemplifies a frustrating inability to bridge the gap between political decisions and implementation on the ground. We're not living in the 5th century BC; this is the age of instant communication, overt round-the-clock economic consciousness and unbridled movement of people and ideas.

If one were to

sincerely make an effort to convert looming tragedy into benign opportunity,

the current scenario could be viewed as "The Pangs of Reunion", an actual desire by the public to revert the region back to its natural formation, minus borders of course.

A broad strategy could focus on provisioning a return of religious space to the Hindus and Sikhs who were forced to leave Pakistan and Pak-administered Kashmir. Hence re-vitalising their ancestral roots and giving those areas the much-needed diversity they have sorely lacked for 61 years. L.K. Advani and others should work vigorously with the Pakistani establishment to re-create Hindu space in Pakistan, especially in his home province of Sindh where remaining Hindus live in isolation.

Giving the Hindus and Sikhs who live in the border areas of Indian-administered Kashmir, an opportunity to rebuild their mandirs and gurdwaras in their ancestral land in Pak-administered Kashmir, is a crucial part of this suggestion.

In light of all above, Amarnath is but a minor issue, perhaps not worth the environmental degradation and political agitation that it has evoked. Symbolising it as a landmark of the re-union of the sub-continent could have unlimited positive consequences.

The 61 year old Indo-Pak mess could be transformed into giving the Kashmiris what the Moghuls, Afghans, Ranjit's Sikhs, the Brits and Dogra rule couldn't give them...the freedom to utilise their abundance of talent.

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