



New Indian Initiatives in Kashmir

Suba Chandran
Assistant Director, IPCS

India announced a dozen new proposals during the third week of October 2003, to improve its relations with Pakistan. Of these, a proposal to initiate a bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, along with an independent initiative to speak to the All Party Hurriyat Conference pertains to Kashmir. These two initiatives, one within Indian borders and the other across the Line of Control (LoC) are of vital significance to the peace process in Jammu and Kashmir; hence it is essential that the Union government pursue both these initiatives.

Speaking to the Hurriyat

The Union government's decision to speak to the Hurriyat directly is the most important decision since it conducted free and fair elections in Jammu and Kashmir. Choosing L.K Advani, the Union Home Minister, as the person to speak to the Hurriyat leadership is a wise political move, as any compromise that he reaches with the Hurriyat could be 'sold' to hardliners in the BJP and the Sangh Parivar..

- **Importance of the Hurriyat**

It is vital that the Union government initiates a dialogue with the Hurriyat and sustains it over time for the following reasons. First, irrespective of its claim to be the sole representative of the Kashmiris, the Hurriyat does reflect a sizeable section of Kashmiri opinion. The Union government's efforts have all along been either to marginalize the Hurriyat by refusing to negotiate or bring it into the mainstream by pressuring it to participate in the elections. Both have failed. The peace process cannot succeed unless the Hurriyat is included, as its exclusion would undermine the peace process. The

Hurriyat has significant street power to negate any peace process, although it may not have the political clout to form a government on its own. Ignoring the Hurriyat, as if it does not exist, is not going to be a practical solution.

Second, the Hurriyat is important in Kashmiri politics, as it provides the much-needed political space between militancy and the moderate demand for an independent Kashmir or maximum autonomy. This political space is essential in any internal conflict for the state, as its lack will only increase the violence level with the militant groups being the only alternative. Besides, the bargaining capacity of the state would get reduced with the main antagonist representing an extreme position. The main reason for the failure of Israel and Sri Lanka has been the absence of this moderate voice, either due to actions taken by the state or the militants. Fortunately, in Kashmir, neither the state nor the militants have tried attempted to stifle this moderate space.

Third, a dialogue with the Hurriyat is essential, as other recent initiatives by the Union government have failed to yield any worthwhile results. Though the 2002 elections for the State legislative assembly were successfully organized and a new government led by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed had been formed, peace is yet to be established. The 'healing touch' policy initiated by the State government and the appointment of NN Vohra as the new interlocutor to speak to the various groups failed to achieve any improvement at the ground level.

- **Components of the 'separatist' dialogue**

First, separate the rhetoric from reality. The Hurriyat led by Abbas Ansari need to make public

statements demanding more from the Union government, but they may privately be amenable to concessions. Though leaders like Yasin Malik demand an independent Kashmir, this view is not shared by all within the Hurriyat. The moderate section led by Abbas Ansari, Umar Farooq, the Mirwaiz of Kashmir, Abdul Ghani Bhat and Sajjad Lone, son of Abdul Ghani Lone, is more realistic and is aware of the problems embedded in an independent Kashmir. At the rhetorical level they may keep insisting on independence for Kashmir, but they would be agreeable to accepting other options. Abdul Ghani Bhat, the previous Chairman of the APHC, in an interview candidly admitted that an "independent Kashmir is not a workable idea as it is not acceptable to India, Pakistan and China. It is essential that Advani initiates contacts with the Hurriyat and sustains it, irrespective of what is being said in public.

Second, provide political space to the Hurriyat. Recent changes within Kashmir and in the Hurriyat could marginalize the moderates and the space it is occupying. The split inside the Hurriyat and formation of a parallel organization led by Syed Ali Geelani is a dangerous development. Geelani's linkages with the militant groups and his pro-Pakistan rhetoric are well known. With the new government not able to perform up to Kashmiri expectations and the moderates in Hurriyat not

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A marginalized Hurriyat is not in India's interest, as it would reduce the political space it is occupying and enlarge the space for militancy. The Hurriyat denies this space for the militants, and acts as a safety-valve. It is therefore in the government's

interest that the Hurriyat continue to occupy this space. The government's decision to initiate a dialogue with the Hurriyat led by Abbas Ansari would, in fact, bring the moderate section back to the central stage.

Third, the main object should not be aimed at pressurizing the Hurriyat to become a part of main stream politics by participating in the elections. This move would back-fire and has two major negative consequences. First, the Union government would lose the trust of the moderate Hurriyat leaders, but also of the valley population, which would have implications for the ongoing peace process. Second, this would only increase the popular support for the Geelani-led Hurriyat and militancy at the cost of the moderate Ansari-led Hurriyat. Instead, the Union government should allow the Hurriyat to play an important role in the peace process. Abbas Ansari, the new Hurriyat Chief, is on record demanding a new cease-fire between the Indian security forces and the militants, promising to convince the militants to accept the cease-fire. This could be made as a starting point to involve the Hurriyat by letting them have a stake in the cease-fire.

Fourth, Advani could discuss the quantum of autonomy that could be given to Kashmir. There is an element of autonomy that needs to be devolved to Jammu and Kashmir; why not discuss it with the Hurriyat? This may not be accepted publicly, but the Hurriyat led by Abbas Ansari is pragmatic enough to understand the limitations of an independent Kashmir.

Fifth, if the Hurriyat wants to speak to leaders in other parts of Kashmir and India, they should be allowed. A Hurriyat delegation to PoK or Pakistan would enhance the image of the moderate section, thereby undermining the militant groups and the faction led by Geelani. It would also increase public expectations, which would also exert adequate pressure on the militant groups.

Last, the Indian government should not get back to the old mantra of a dialogue with separatists only within the frame-work of the Indian constitution. It has taken a bold step, and should be bold enough to sustain the dialogue and not cave into pressure from inside the party.

Bus to Muzaffarabad

Another bold proposal by India relates to initiating a bus service between the two capitals of Kashmir (Srinagar being the capital of Jammu and Kashmir, and Muzaffarabad the capital of Pakistan controlled Kashmir). Does this mean that India tacitly accepts giving up its claim to what it calls Pakistan occupied Kashmir? Has India, at last, recognized the ground realities to depart from its parliamentary resolution demanding the getting back of these 'lost' territories?

Whatever may be the hidden implications, the bus service if it ever materializes, would enhance Indian interests in Kashmir, and prove to be a significant confidence building measure at two levels. First, it would considerably enhance India's image among the Kashmiris and convince them that the Union government is serious about breaking the deadlock in Kashmir. Second, it would increase pressure at the grass roots level on Pakistan for agreeing to deepen the cultural and social links between two Kashmirs. India has nothing to lose, but a lot to gain by pursuing this proposal, irrespective of Pakistan's reactions to it.

- **What would the bus carry?**

It would boost the Indian image within both Kashmirs, as the Kashmiris living on both sides of the LoC have been demanding enhanced people-to-people level contacts between the two sides so that they could meet each other. Though they can legally travel by the longer route via New Delhi and Islamabad, it has rarely been possible for the Kashmiris to meet each other. The strict visa regime between the two countries makes it difficult for the Kashmiris to visit the other side. Besides, it normally takes four to five days of travel and considerable expense, while the direct road from Baramulla to Muzaffarabad is only 120 kms long and takes a maximum of four hours.

There are many family ties between the two Kashmirs and members of the same family live across the LoC. There have been many instances when members of a family wait near the LoC to see their relatives waving and even shouting from their side of the border. There have been a number of heart rending scenes when newly borns were lifted high in the air, so that those living across the border could see these babies. The bus service would strengthen the institution of the Mirwaiz, led by Umar Farooq, who is an important member of the APHC moderate faction. In fact,

the Mirwaiz family itself is divided by the Line of Control (LoC).

Second, besides being a CBM at the social and religious level between two Kashmirs, a bus service between the two capitals would have an impact at the political level. The All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) has political linkages with the other Kashmir, especially the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) led by Yasin Malik and Javid Mir. Yasin Malik has been a severe critic of the Union government and is the main force in the APHC (led by Abbas Ansari) reluctant to initiate a dialogue with NN Vohra. On the other hand, moderates in the APHC like Abdul Ghani Lone, Abbas Ansari, Sajjad Lone and Mirwaiz Farooq are convinced of the need for a dialogue with the Union government. The proposed bus service would soften the stance of hardline elements in the Hurriyat like Yasin Malik. Thus a bus service would also have a positive influence over the other objective of India - initiating a dialogue with the APHC.

Third, it would pressure Pakistan to improve linkages between both Kashmirs. It has responded in a way that would compel India to reject its counter-proposal to blame the latter for obstructing people-to-people level contacts between the Kashmiris. Pakistan has asked for the presence of UN monitors in the check posts and that Kashmiris should travel on UN documents. A bus service between the two Kashmirs and people-to-people contacts across the LoC is not in the interests of Pakistan. Irrespective of its accusations of human rights violations by Indian security forces, Pakistan is well aware the Indian Kashmir is much better than the territory under its control in terms of basic necessities. Irrespective of the criticism about governance by the previous

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Abdullah and present Mufti governments, the standard of living, education and access to basic amenities is much better on the Indian side.

How should India respond to Pakistan's rider to the Indian proposal on the bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad? Both countries agree on facilitating the movement of Kashmiris but differ in its modalities. India wants Kashmiris from the Indian side to travel across the LoC on Indian passports and Kashmiris from other side to come with Pakistani passports. People living in Pakistan occupied Kashmir, are traveling outside Pakistan on Pakistani passports. Clearly, Pakistan's rider is intended to force India to reject the proposal.

Instead of rejecting it completely, India could attempt to resolve the impasse by forming a sub-committee on Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service as part of a larger committee to respond to problems relating to the movement of people between the two countries by road, rail and sea. India could take the initiative to include Kashmiris from both sides in this sub committee. It could also recommend an independent committee comprising of respected individuals from both Kashmir, India and Pakistan to work out the modalities and make recommendations. The Indian government could even request the Hurriyat leaders to join this exercise, as a part of its overall dialogue with the latter.

Whatever be the outcome of these committees, India has nothing to lose by trying. Rejecting Pakistan's counter-proposal at the outset would have negative implications for the peace process in Kashmir and the dialogue with the Hurriyat. Both the proposed bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, and the decision to negotiate with the Hurriyat are bold initiatives and politically wise moves. It is in India's interests that both these efforts are sustained.



**INSTITUTE OF PEACE
AND
CONFLICT STUDIES**

B 7/3 Safdarjung Enclave,
New Delhi 110029 INDIA