

WAR IN KARGIL, PEACE IN LAHORE

Radha Kumar

Had the Pakistani scholar and journalist, Eqbal Ahmad been alive today, he would have been hopping mad at the havoc India and Pakistan are wreaking in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. Some weeks before he died, on May 11 last, he expressed pessimism over the prospects for India-Pakistan peace. Coming from a man who had devoted the last five years of his life to initiatives for overcoming the hostilities of Partition and who was, moreover, a man given to fighting the odds, his pessimism is noteworthy. He believed that India's nuclear tests, and Pakistan's tit-for-tat response, had brought about a qualitative and possibly in the long-run generic—change in Indo-Pakistani relations. The real point about arms races, he said, was not just the accumulation of an ever-increasing sophisticated hardware and the concomitant depletion of the much-needed resources, but the inevitable urge to both up the ante in tensions and use hardware as a substitute for talks.

Moreover, he argued, nuclearism was not about deterrence: after Hiroshima, the development of nuclear weapons and of a nuclear doctrine had served primarily as a cover for war by other means—a covert, low-intensity warfare. In the subcontinent, Pakistan's search for a nuclear option after the birth of Bangladesh and India's Pokhran test of 1974 testified to the tacit conclusion that a war was too costly. By the late 1970s, the two armies were advising their governments that neither country could win a war against the other and the hostilities shifted to an arms race, border scraps and covert warfare. The arms race, however, was contained by the Congress' avowed opposition to the Cold War nuclear doctrine, especially under Rajiv Gandhi.

This had been the pattern of Indo-Pakistani relations for close to 20 years. Till the mid-1990s, the only attempt to open a peace process was a shortlived initiative by Rajiv Gandhi and Ms. Benazir Bhutto, which soon foundered on domestic anvils. Then came the Gujral doctrine to make good neighbourly relations India's prime foreign policy goal. The format and the elements of the present peace talks were set at that time, but Mr. Gujral lacked both the will and the political support to sign an agreement with Pakistan. Mr. Vajpayee, most analysts felt, could fill both gaps. But the first act of the BJP Government was to test its nuclear weapons.

In the week before Mr. Nawaz Sharif tested Pakistan's bomb, Ahmad toured the length and breadth of the country trying to mobilise political opinion against a Pakistani tit-for-tat response. Had he succeeded, Pakistan would have escaped its current economic and political crises and emerged stronger militarily because of enormous Western support. More to the point from my Indian patriotic perspective, shameful as this is to confess, we would have been saved from an arms race and the escalation of the low-intensity warfare which Ahmad predicted would ensue.

Unfortunately, the Kargil conflict shows how accurate his prediction was. Pakistan has stepped up insurgency, first in the Doda district of Jammu and now across the Line of Control around Kargil. India responded to the Doda insurgency in the same way as in the Valley with traditional counter-insurgency measures and has reacted to the Kargil conflict with a combined air and ground operation.

Kargil is different—its Muslims are Shias with little sympathy for the militants' goal of either independence or union with Pakistan. In this sense, the militant incursion across the LoC has an eye on both the Siachen dispute and the Kashmir talks. The area around the LoC—lying along Dras, Kargil and Batalik—is on the route towards Siachen. In 1947-48, it was controlled by Pakistan, India won it in the 1965 war but returned it to Pakistan and, again, won it in 1971 and this time retained it. It now overlooks the main Srinagar-Leh highway and whoever controls it can simultaneously make army logistics far more complicated, and cut off Ladakh from the Valley.

Talks have been deadlocked over Siachen—a few square miles of no-man's land—which Pakistan claims India illegally took after 1971. India shrugs and suggests that the existing positions be regularised to complete the LoC, which has remained indeterminate in the mountainous terrain around Siachen. An alternative proposal to withdraw to defensible positions and declare the region an ecologically-protected, non-combat zone is yet to be taken seriously, largely because neither country will trust the other within an inch, let alone a few square miles.

The Kashmir talks are a more complicated issue. At base, neither India nor Pakistan is willing to come to grips with the central question of whether to open a peace process in Kashmir (on the lines of the Irish peace process) or to seek a final resolution of the conflict through another partition of the State, dividing the Valley from Jammu and Ladakh. Under this scenario, Jammu and Ladakh remain with India, while the Valley joins Pakistan. Kargil is discussed as a problem because it is now majority Muslim and thus ought to go to Pakistan on the communal principle. Kargil's Shia population does not seem to be taken into consideration—what is considered a problem is that were Kargil to go, Ladakh would effectively be cut off from the rest of India, so a series of alternative routes are proposed.

The most detailed of these proposals has been made by Alastair Lamb, a specious Kashmir-watcher whose position has changed from a 20-year long gung-ho, "the whole state belongs to Pakistan", to a humbler advocacy of the Valley's secession alone, possibly with Kargil. His change has clearly followed the 1995 Dayton Agreement

for Bosnia, which effected a partial partition of the country and reinvented partition as a possible solution to the ethnic conflict. Ahmad, who wrote some two dozen articles on what could and should be done in Kashmir, despised such views. In the 1980s, he suggested full autonomy for the Valley, with a possible joint Indo-Pakistani sovereignty, a no-war pact, soft borders and the continuation of Jammu and Ladakh under Indian sovereignty. By the 1990s, he had concluded that India would never give up Kashmir and started flaying the vast array of "Indian human rights violations" in the Valley. Indeed, he believed that if India curtailed its army and paramilitary violence against civilians, it would be possible to persuade Pakistan that the Kashmir talks should be delinked from the regularisation of trade, the easing of visas and the Siachen conflict.

Over the past year, Ahmad had come to the view that the only possible solution was to open a peace process with the aim of an exponential growth. He believed that the other issues were capable of a relatively speedy resolution but Kashmir would need time and a gradual process of reconciliation. A peace process which adapted the Irish model to subcontinental conditions — keeping in mind that the Irish agreements took a good 20 years of negotiations to reach

— seemed more appropriate than the tattered Oslo process which was being suggested in some international quarters.

India and Pakistan have time and time again agreed on confidence-building measures, but these only seem to come into play after the confidence has been damaged. As long as we continue an arms race, escalate insurgency and squabble over unlivable pieces of territory, we are unlikely to be able to put stable confidence-building measures in place.

Yet Ahmad's strongest single belief was that of all partitioned countries, India and Pakistan are in the best position to overcome their hostilities. We are poor and we need each other's markets and skills badly. We have had a common history and culture which we not only have not forgotten but continue in the main to value. Thus far, our politicians have had no difficulty meeting face to face (unlike the proximity talks which the Bosnian, Cypriot and Irish leaders underwent). Our people are welcomed in each other's countries, even when fighting is going on in Kashmir. It is neither our desires, nor our needs, nor even our interests (be they army or communal) which are holding us apart: as Ahmad would say, it is our complete inability to understand our interests or think of fulfilling our needs and desires, which gives the urge to cut off our noses to spite our faces so irresistible. ■

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Translation of *The End of Imagination*

by

Arundhati Roy

(also available in English)

විමසීම් : සුරියා පොත්හල,
425/15, තිඹිරිගස්සාය පාර, කොළඹ-05.
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