

The Chances for Peace in the Indian Sub-Continent

OR

A Bus Ride for Peace & Friendship

by **S.V.Raju**

Before the British came to India as traders and ended up as rulers no such national entity called India existed. The sub-continent had hundreds of kingdoms, small and big, some ruled by Hindu kings, others by Muslims kings. These kingdoms were often at war with each other. These wars were generally based not on religion but on territorial ambitions. It was therefore not a Hindu king *versus* a Muslim king but often a mix of both fighting another mix of both.

British rule was preceded by Mughal rule (the Mughals who came from central Asia ruled India for over 200 years from around 1529 to 1739). In 1757 the British won a decisive victory which helped them take over the seat of power vacated by the Mughals. For the next 190 years, till 1947, the British ruled India. They annexed the many kingdoms in the sub-continent even though in some cases, they allowed the local kings to retain their kingdoms by the simple expedient of accepting the British as the imperial power. But the territories directly ruled by the British and those ruled by the Indian princes were part of one Crown Colony – India.

The replacement of Mughal rule by British rule saw the Muslim elite pushed out of the seats of political power. The court language of the Mughals was Persian and of the British, English. The Hindus who served the Moghuls, many in positions of high responsibility now served their new masters – the British. They learnt English, (just as they learnt Persian to serve the Mughals) and were quick to adapt to the ways of the British. On the other hand Muslim religious leaders were against Western education. So they were unable to get jobs in British India and lagged behind. This, many students of Indian history aver, was a major cause for the backwardness of Muslims and their sense of grievance against both the British rulers and their Hindu civil servants.

Even so, the relations between the communities were cordial even friendly. Most Indians today other than those in the deep south are descendents of numerous tribes that came into India over the centuries through the northern passes to conquer and rule various parts of the sub-continent. The last of these were the Muslims who initially swooped down the passes for loot, plunder but later came down into the plains of India and set up their kingdoms. While the earlier invaders came to rule and not proselytize, Muslims, barring a few exceptions were not only determined to rule but to convert. This explains why, after Indonesia, the second largest Muslim population is in India and not Pakistan. The cultural ethos being almost similar there was little to differentiate the Muslim from the Hindu. Other than their respective religious practices they were similar in all other respects. By and large the relationship between the two communities was harmonious.

Mutual suspicions started surfacing when the freedom movement gathered strength and it became clear that sooner or later the British would leave India. To counter the freedom movement, the British resorted to a policy of 'divide and rule' where, through subtle and no so subtle means (such as wondering what would be the fate of Muslims in a Hindu-dominated free India and so on) the British sought to encourage Muslim fears.

This led to the birth of the the All India Muslim League sometime in 1906 or 1907. The Objective of the League was not a separate nation for the Muslims but to protect the rights of Muslims. This resulted in separate electorates for Muslims and the divide between the two communities widened. The Indian National Congress, which led the freedom movement under the leadership of Mahama Gandhi, wanted a secular India in which all religions would be given equal respect. But often their words and actions were contradictory. In 1940 the All India Muslim League under the leadership of Mr.M.A.Jinnah demanded a separate state of Pakistan.

Pakistan was founded on 14th August 1947 and India became free the next day, 15th August 1947. The days that followed Partition saw bloody massacres of people on a scale never seen before in the history of humankind. It is said trainloads of Muslim corpses steamed northwards and similar trainloads of Hindu corpses travelled south. Their only

crime was they were either Hindus escaping from newly created Pakistan or Muslims escaping from India. While states in the north with a Muslim majority went to Pakistan as also a part of Bengal to the east, 565 princely states were given the option of choosing between India, Pakistan or being independent sovereign states. The last was really no option. Geographical contiguity and the communal composition of the states concerned were the decisive factors.

Kashmir had the misfortune of being geographically contiguous to India and Pakistan with a Muslim majority and a Hindu ruler. The Maharaja of Kashmir seeing the possibility of an independent Kashmir, prevaricated. Less than three months later without waiting for the Maharaja to make up his mind, raiders from across the border led by Pakistani military personnel invaded the state and were within sight of the capital Srinagar when the Maharaja in a panic decided to accede to India. Indian troops under a British Commander in Chief stopped the invaders but had not yet chased them out of the State when India took the case to the United Nations. A cease fire was declared and Kashmir became a pawn in the cold war; India and Pakistan fought two more wars in 1965 and 1971 on Kashmir. In both wars peace was brokered by the Soviet Union the first at Tashkent and the other at Simla in India. The two wars did not change the Line of Control which remains what it was when the raiders were driven back in 1947. But the 1971 war resulted in the dismemberment of Pakistan. They lost the province of which emerged as the independent state of Bangladesh. The cold war has ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union but the cold war between India and Pakistan continues with prospects of a hot war always lurking round the corner.

The Partition holocaust was deeply etched in the memory of those who survived on both sides of the dividing line. The new generation that was born much after partition and who did not have to go through the rigours of a life as a refugee, are now of age and they are the one's who question the continuing enmity. On them depends the hope of putting the past behind and finding ways of getting to terms with reality.

The Kashmir problem was not the only one that was born with Partition but its solution holds the key to the chances of a lasting peace in the sub-continent and most important of

all to a better standard of life for the peoples of both countries. Meanwhile the good news is that the most talked about solution of freezing the Line of Control (LoC) the old cease fire line does not invite either ridicule or anger. The bad news is that the terrorists belonging to various Islamic groups armed with weapons supplied to the Afghan Mujahideen by the Americans continue to convert large parts of Kashmir into killing fields. They want to see a Taliban-like solution. Even while the much hyped bus ride to Lahore was taking place, they struck in a remote village killing over 20 innocent people. While India and Pakistan treat Kashmir as a dispute over real estate and the terrorists would want to convert Kashmir into an Islamic state, the views of the Kashmiri people are simply ignored.

Meanwhile internal political considerations prompt the politicians in both countries to act in a manner that they perceive is necessary for their survival. In India the BJP which is the major partner in a rather brittle coalition that looks like breaking at any time, decided to explode a nuclear device to gather public support. Pakistan's ruling party had to respond in kind. They had the added liability of their Big Brother the Army Generals watching. One can only guess how the armed forces would have reacted if the ruling party in Pakistan had not reacted the way it did and had not exploded its own device. In India the euphoria quickly evaporated not only because of US sanctions (they harmed Pakistan more than India which has had the dubious benefit of an ideologically-motivated insulated economy for many years, anyway) but because the public by and large berated the rulers for lopsided priorities. The statement that the explosions were more to warn communist China than to frighten Pakistan cut no ice with opinion makers who apart from commenting that such talk was tactless and immature felt it was an afterthought. In Pakistan there was criticism, though understandably muted, that given the parlous state of their economy and the threat of US sanctions it would have been best if Pakistan had not retaliated in kind and thus had taken the opportunity to occupy the moral high ground.

The nuclear explosions may have saved national egos but is there any possibility of a nuclear war between the two neighbours? Here the theory of deterrent is cited repeatedly to prove that now that both countries have the nuclear deterrent the chances of a war,

even a conventional one, have receded. They point out that if the Americans had not possessed a superior arsenal of nuclear weapons *vis-a-vis* the Soviet Union, perhaps the cold war would have ended differently. On the other hand the fact that Soviet excellence in the production of arms has not been matched by the performance of its economy and which ultimately led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself has not been lost on the publics of India and Pakistan.

The best bet for peace in the sub-continent is the hope that democracy will survive in Pakistan and its democracy is not hijacked by the military.

Which brings us to the Indian Prime Minister's bus ride to Pakistan. It was symbolic. It cannot of course be compared to Anwar Sadat's dramatic trip to Tel Aviv which set in motion the middle east process. That required courage of an extraordinary kind and for which he paid with his life. While it would be churlish to state that the Indian prime minister was trying to achieve through a bus ride what a bomb could not, the fact remains that high expectations from this highly hyped high profile 20-minute bus trip would be unrealistic. The applause and near universal approval for the initiative taken by the Indian Prime Minister (According to a press report the Pakistan Prime Minister, somewhat in more in jest perhaps, suggested to India's foreign minister that the Indian Prime Minister inaugurate the proposed resumption of a bus service between the two countries as part of the peace process be inaugurated by the Prime Minister of India by travelling in the bus himself. If he did that then Pakistan's Prime Minister would receive him on the other side of the border led the Indian foreign minister to persuade his prime minister to do so is an indication of the desire of people on both sides of the border for normalcy and good relations.

I say this from personal knowledge. In the September of 1997 I had the opportunity to participate in a seminar on the role of civil society in India and Pakistan. The seminar was held in Karachi. I will not go into the difficulties in obtaining visa etc. That was expected. But what I did not expect was the warmth of the people at the seminar. Not for a moment did I feel I was outside India. Just a day or two earlier there had been an

intense exchange of fire on the border that had resulted in the killing of soldiers on both sides. But this seemed to have had little impact, at least on the participants at the seminar, for there were few references to it. Repeatedly the Pakistani participants made the point that elder brother India had not only to be more generous but be more understanding. India they pointed out had failed to keep her promise of letting the people of Kashmir decide their own future. When I pointed out that I had once belonged to a party that had, in the sixties, not only taken the stand that the promise of plebiscite should be honoured; but that if the Kashmiris decided to be independent than its independence should be guaranteed by both India and Pakistan drew nods of approval. When I went on to add that the party had also recommended that the two countries should form a confederation, there was applause. If the responses of the people gathered reflected the opinion of the educated class of Karachi, then the mood is not so much of anger with India as one of disappointment that despite being a democracy we had not shown enough maturity and magnanimity than those who ruled Pakistan by fiat. There was near unanimous agreement that visa restrictions need to be lifted and that trade should be freed. At present Indian goods to Pakistan and vice versa travel via Dubai or Nepal! They wanted free flow of information and the internet they pointed out was one way of defeating travel restrictions.

The people in India and Pakistan want peace and good neighbourly relations. They want to trade and to be able to travel to visit relatives and friends on both sides of the border without being hassled. The governments of both countries have sensed this desire and perhaps the nuclear adventure might have had the effect of energising the people into pressuring their governments to restore normal relations as the alternatives are too terrible to even imagine.

March 8, 1999