
A Golden Opportunity for South Asia

STANLEY WOLPERT

Professor of History, University of California at Los Angeles

This golden jubilee year of India's independence and of the birth of Pakistan, offers South Asia's most powerful nations a golden opportunity for enlightened change. With Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral now at the helm of New Delhi's polity, and Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif enjoying great popular support in Islamabad, South Asia may at last be ready to end half a century of mortal conflict and enter the next millennium at peace.

Fifty years of war and terror, causing chaos and economic dislocation, have been the bitter legacies of a hasty, inept Partition that tore apart British India's breadbasket of Punjab and its most populous province of Bengal in mid-August 1947. Deep-rooted religious differences and competing political ambitions conspired to disrupt British India's stability with periodic communal riots during the last four decades of that Raj. All three of the major parties of the Partition, Britain's Government of India, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League, share historic blame for the bloody transfer of power that left more than a million fleeing Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs to die violently in the Partition's immediate aftermath.

The end of World War II found Great Britain so sick of imperial responsibilities and in such deep Sterling debt to India that its new Labour Government could barely wait to extricate itself from South Asia. Prime Minister Attlee sent the King's handsome young cousin, "Dickie" Lord Mountbatten, to New Delhi to put the best British ceremonial face on that final act of the Raj, with pomp and pageantry enough on the eve of Partition for the world's press almost to blot out the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh bloodbath of a civil war that ravaged the subcontinent

in its wake.

Whether Muslim League President M.A. Jinnah, with his League's Lahore resolution demanding a Muslim "Land of the Pure" (Pakistan), was more or less responsible for the Partition than National Congress President Jawaharlal Nehru, whose Marxist-Leninism relegated Jinnah's "reactionary two-nation theory" to history's "dustbin," hardly seems as significant today as the question of how Premiers Gujral and Sharif plan to resolve their poor nations' economic problems and turn foreign policies of violent confrontation into bold new initiatives for peace. During his most recent tenure as Minister for External Affairs in Deve Gowda's United Front government, Prime Minister Gujral showed the way, launching

The premier foreign policy problem, over which India and Pakistan have fought and argued for fifty years, is Kashmir.

his "Gujral Doctrine" of proactive policies toward all of India's neighbors. He reached out with historic Ganga and Mahakali waters-sharing agreements to Bangladesh and Nepal, visited Sri Lanka, calling for a swift end to

its ethnic civil war, started bilateral talks with Pakistan in the spirit of the Simla Agreement of 1972, and made overtures of trade and friendship to China, Central Asia's Republics, and all of Southeast Asia. Foreign Minister Gujral had, indeed, just inaugurated the 1997 meeting of Non-Aligned Nations in New Delhi in April when Sitaram Kesri's withdrawal of his Congress Party support of Deve Gowda from the "outside" triggered a vote of no-confidence in Lok Sabha that changed India's leadership. As his own foreign minister, Prime Minister Gujral now enjoys more power than any Indian leader since the death of Nehru in 1964. He can, therefore, meet Pakistan's Prime Minister, who also stands secure with more than a two-thirds majority for his PML (N) Party in Islamabad's National Assembly, with unique self-assurance, confident that his generosity will not be misconstrued as weakness, either in Delhi or abroad. Premiers Gujral and Sharif, moreover, speak the same language, having both lived for so many years in Punjab.

The premier foreign policy problem, over which India and Pakistan have fought and argued for fifty years, is Kashmir. That former princely state of British India, Jammu and Kashmir, is to South Asia's peace process what Jerusalem is to Israel and what Belfast is to Ireland. Punjabi folk wisdom, long antedating that of Western think-tanks, always understood that it is easier to eat from a hot plate's shallow edges than from its burning center. Nowadays we say that "cooler" confidence-building measures should be introduced first, negotiating resolutions of the easiest questions before trying to resolve such explosive issues as Kashmir or Jerusalem. It is, of course, simpler for India and Pakistan to reach agreements on visa procedures, cultural exchanges, and most matters of foreign trade than to resolve the complex problem of Kashmir.

Most Indian officials argue that there really is "no problem" for India in Kashmir. The problem, they insist, is Pakistan, and Pakistan-sponsored "terror-

ism.” Those same Indians do not, however, deny that India now keeps more than half a million of its army permanently based in a state with little more than seven million people. The reason so large a force is “required,” they explain, is precisely because Pakistan “trains, arms, and sends thousands of Muslim terrorists” across the line of control in Kashmir, trying to “destabilize” the situation around Srinagar and “take Kashmir State away” from India. Pakistani officials insist, on the other hand, that India’s army is one of occupation in Kashmir, controlling, indeed, brutally intimidating its mostly Muslim population, which would much rather, had it the freedom to choose by plebiscite, join Pakistan. Many ardent Kashmiri separatists, however, insist that given the option and opportunity to do so they would prefer independence for their long-suffering state. They assert that most Kashmiris are as terrified of joining Pakistan as they are sick and tired of being protected and saved by bullying, insensitive Indian soldiers. Estimates vary, but a number of accounts by impartial sources over the past decade contend that more than 15,000 Kashmiris, Hindus as well as Muslims, have been brutally slaughtered in and around Srinagar, the once legendary “Happy Valley,” called “Paradise on earth,” now a veritable hell for many Kashmiri families.

The historic roots of Kashmiri conflict reach back much deeper than a decade, however. By mid-August of 1947 almost all of the 570 Princely States under British hegemony in South Asia had opted to join either the Dominion of India or of Pakistan, the latter carved out of the Muslim-majority provinces of British India’s Northwest and Northeast. Kashmir with a population of some four million at the time, 77 percent of whom were Muslim, might also have been expected to join Pakistan, but its ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, was Hindu, and he hoped that he would be permitted to keep Kashmir independent, a Switzerland of South Asia. Muslim Pakistan soon lost patience with the wily Maharaja’s prevarication, however, and little more than two months after Partition, Pakistani trucks filled with armed Pathan tribals barreled down the Baramulla Road, headed for Hari Singh’s summer palace in Srinagar. That sufficed to make up the Maharaja’s mind, and he immediately acceded his state to India, appealing for martial support from New Delhi.

Governor General Mountbatten “provisionally” accepted that “accession” of Kashmir to India, and with Prime Minister Nehru, who took special pride in his Kashmiri (Pandit Brahman) ancestry, organized a lightening airlift of India’s toughest regiment to save Srinagar, pushing back the undisciplined tribals. Nehru initially agreed with Mountbatten that as soon as order was restored to the state, a plebiscite would have to be held to ascertain the true wishes of the majority of the people of Kashmir, and to determine whether they preferred to remain in India or join Pakistan. First, India brought to the United Nations Security Council formal charges that aggression had been committed by Pakistan in Kashmir. Pakistan argued, however, that India had “fraudulently procured” the accession of that mostly Muslim State. The Security Council decided to appoint its own Commission on India and Pakistan (UNCIP) to assess the conflicting claims. A cease

fire was agreed upon in January 1949, ending the first Indo-Pak War in Kashmir, with the de facto martial line of control of that date dividing Kashmir into Pakistan's *Azad* ("Free") Kashmir (the western portion of the old state) and India's Jammu and Kashmir, which included the remaining three-quarters of the Vale and Jammu. Jammu and Kashmir is the only Muslim-majority state in India's Union of twenty-five states. Many UN diplomats tried diligently to resolve Indo-Pak differences at countless conferences over Kashmir, hoping to arrange a plebiscite that could be conducted under UN auspices with UN monitors. All this came to no avail.

After 1954, Prime Minister Nehru stopped paying lip service to his earlier promise to hold a plebiscite when the fighting ended, order and calm had been restored, and all tribal raiders were removed from the Vale. The Cold War added its diplomatic chill to Kashmir's conflict and froze its division, or de facto partition, along the martial Line of Control (LOC) as it is currently called. After 1954, Pakistan had become America's "most allied Ally" in Asia, giving India "reason" enough, Nehru insisted, to reject every Western argument that a plebiscite should be held in Kashmir, since India could not risk losing so strategic a portion of its Union to a hostile neighbor, armed "to the teeth" with the most modern offensive planes, tanks, and artillery. Washington's assurances to India that no Western arms to Pakistan would ever be used against India, and that they were meant only to deter the Soviet Union or Chinese Communist aggression against Pakistan, did not convince Nehru. In 1965 India and Pakistan fought a second war over Kashmir, and in 1971 they clashed once again, though at that time the primary focus of martial conflict was Bangladesh. In 1965 Pakistan used heavy U.S. tanks and other arms to launch its Operation Grand Slam against Kashmir. Then in 1971, Nehru's daughter, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, turned to Russia for arms, liberating Bangladesh from Pakistan's martial fist with an Indian Army led by Soviet tanks and artillery.

The disastrous Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which ultimately played a role in the U.S.S.R.'s own demise, bringing down the final curtain on the Cold War, was stopped by intrepid Afghan "*Mujahidin*" ("Freedom Fighters") using mostly Western arms shipped to Pakistan. Thousands of those martially trained, heavily armed Pathans have turned, since 1989, from Afghanistan toward Kashmir, sponsored by Pakistan's virtually autonomous Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) unit, which has always viewed India's Army in Kashmir as "usurpers" of its rightful domain, since "K" — standing for Kashmir — is at the heart of Pakistan's acronym. To India, as to most of the world, however, the Afghan fighters are "terrorists," using bombs, grenades and missile rockets to attack not only Indian army units in Kashmir, but civilians as well, blowing up buses, firing at unarmed men and people in private cars, and hurling rockets at hotels and house boats. Thousands of those "terrorists" are annually killed by Indian troops, but ISI generals consider the cost of their beefed-up proxy war relatively cheap, given what India spends on Kashmir and the potential value to Pakistan of that crown jewel state atop the subcontinent of South Asia.

What about the Kashmiris themselves? How must they feel, living between Pakistan's snarling, gnashing tiger, and India's "protective" elephant stomping all over the once fecund, now sadly impoverished, leafless garden of their motherland? India insists that local elections held in Kashmir under the watchful eyes of its huge army are exactly the same as a plebiscite. The most recent local elections were held late in 1996, and Dr. Farooq Abdulla's National Conference easily won most State Assembly seats, though less than 30 percent of Kashmir's enfranchised populace voted, even with martial encouragement to do so. Dr. Farooq is the son of Kashmir's deceased Sheikh Abdulla, the "Lion of Kashmir," Nehru's protégé and "friend," once elevated to the high position his son currently holds, but later removed to jail after he stated publicly, in India as well as London, that he would prefer Kashmiri independence to Indian rule. Nehru kept his lion locked behind prison bars for more than a decade for his fearless advocacy of Kashmiri freedom. The lion's son has grown more cautious, guarding his tongue almost as carefully as India's Army now guards him. The facade presented to India and the world by Dr. Farooq is one of "popular democratic" rule over Kashmir. However, he is viewed with contempt as "India's puppet" by Pakistan and by Kashmiri nationalists, who respect only their Hurriyat leaders, all of whom remained in prison cells or hospital wards during those elections.

Kashmiris are practical and level-headed enough to understand that total national independence is an unrealistic dream.

Recent impartial polls taken of Kashmiris, other than in Jammu with its Hindu majority favoring India, indicate that most would prefer independence to remaining either under Indian "protection," or being "absorbed" by Pakistan. Kashmiris developed early on their own distinctive blend of pluralistic culture, a mixture of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh ideas, ceremonies, and beliefs that enriched the wisest among those gentle people of that beautiful land by its uniquely *Kashmiriyat* character. The union of Jammu and Kashmir, of course, was something of a historic "accident," still reflected in part by the ampersand that awkwardly connects them. Three decades ago it almost seemed as though the leaders of India and Pakistan might agree to leave Jammu with its Hindu majority to join India and Kashmir's Vale with its Muslim majority going to Pakistan.

New Delhi has long since refused to consider any "surrender" of Srinagar and its Valley, however, clearly preferring to keep its army barracked there instead. Nor do most Hurriyat leaders seem as keen to integrate with Pakistan as they are to govern themselves, if India would agree to granting them greater autonomy, if not complete independence. Kashmiris are practical and level-headed enough, to understand that total national independence as an unrealistic a dream for them today, as the retention of their nationwide "unity" might be, were they ever to achieve that elusive goal. For Ladhakh with its Buddhist majority, Srinagar's Vale with its Muslim majority, and Jammu with its Hindu majority are more

nearly three separate “nations” than one. Even as the end of the Cold War has spawned many mini-wars in once unified states like Yugoslavia, so too the end of this half century of Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir might only initiate another half century of ethno-religious disputes within the state itself.

Perhaps the most promising solution, though hardly a Solomonic-one, might be to leave Kashmir’s body divided as it has remained for this past half century, solemnly converting the Line of Control into an international border between India and Pakistan. It is likely that this arrangement would satisfy no one, however. Nor is there more reason to hope that Pakistan would stop sending armed marauders over the same “line,” though it were called by a more impressive name, than that India would reduce its bloated garrison in the unhappy valley they hold by force and fear rather than national allegiance.

Is there no solution then to the current and continuing conflict in Kashmir? Perhaps not. History has been cursed with its “hundred year” wars elsewhere, of course, and Korea as well as Vietnam have remained divided along similar *de facto* lines of martial control. But how wasteful of poor South Asia’s precious resources, and how painful for all the members, old and young, of those Kashmiri families that continue daily to suffer death or injuries to loved ones or the loss of human dignity that accompanies every battleground, every inch of “occupied” soil, every disputed highway or narrow lane or lovely mountain lake. Surely a better solution can be found, a happier alternative to today’s status quo, if two leaders as strong as Prime Minister Gujral and Prime Minister Sharif sit down together to discuss Indo-Pak problems and bend their powerful minds towards the resolution of outstanding differences.

If, in the spirit of his own wise doctrine, India’s Prime Minister were magnanimously to suggest, for example, that India would be willing to withdraw from one to two hundred thousand troops from Kashmir almost immediately—possibly even to help celebrate its Golden Jubilee of Freedom—and if Pakistan’s Prime Minister committed himself, in turn, to curbing ISI’s arming of terrorist-marauders in Kashmir, the dawn of the next millennium might, if subsequent mutual steps reinforced that courageous initial pullback, witness an era of peace in Kashmir. Perhaps international funding could be found for a “Kashmiri Peace Corps” to rebuild the roads and bridges and dams destroyed in the fighting of the last half century, to install decent drains in Srinagar, making that lovely city hospitable once again to the world’s tourists, and to stimulate the revival of Kashmir’s magnificent arts and crafts, destroyed when their brilliant practitioners were forced by arms and terror to flee the Happy Valley. Is it too sweet a dream to come true? Or is it a national imperative for two countries stalled in a murderous status quo strait jacket inimical to the self-interest of both? ❧