

## **Bus journey into the past**

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"Bhutto agreed that the line would be gradually endowed with the 'characteristics of an international border'. The transition was to take place in the following manner. After the resumption of the traffic between India and Pakistan across the international border had gained momentum, movement of traffic would be allowed at specified points across the line of control... It was thought that the gradual use of the LoC as a de facto frontier, public opinion on both sides would be reconciled to its permanence."

Thus PN Dhar, Indira Gandhi's Secretary, recounted the "secret agreement" at the end of the 1972 Simla Conference. Though this accord was never formalised (or acknowledged), it was probably on the Indian Foreign Minister's mind when, on February 16, he agreed with his Pakistani counterpart to allow bus journeys across the LoC.

Only the future will tell us whether this move is the first step towards making the LoC the new International Border. But there is no doubt that Mr K Natwar Singh follows the plan outlined in Shimla and that ultimately he would like to be the one to complete Mrs Gandhi's unfinished roadmap.

Nobody can deny that greater exchange between both sides of the international border (or even the LoC) is good and should be encouraged. The question which remains in everybody's mind is: Will only the genuine elements benefit from the new scheme? A look into the genesis of the issue can certainly help us to better understand the

trickiness of today's situation.

At the end of October 1947, raiders entered the Valley. They had been ordered by their bosses in Karachi to celebrate Id (October-end) in Srinagar. Unfortunately for their Pakistani sponsors, they lost too much time looting, raping and arsoning in Baramulla. Maharaja Hari Singh realised the seriousness of the situation and was persuaded by VP Menon to sign the Instrument of Accession to India on October 26. The next morning, Indian troops were airlifted to Srinagar. The Maharaja's State was saved. After a decisive battle at Shalatang (outside Srinagar), the Indian troops began to chase out the retreating raiders.

General Sinha, the present J&K Governor, was a young major posted in the Army Headquarters in Delhi. He writes in his memoirs: "We advanced to Pattan, 17 miles from Srinagar the same day and were in Baramula the following afternoon. The enemy had been completely shaken and demoralised after the hard knock at Shalatang." Four days after liberating Baramula, the Indian troops liberated Uri on November 13. The power house at Mahura was restored. "The curtain of darkness over Srinagar was lifted." The light of hope had returned to the Valley. What was the next step? Brigadier "Bogey" Sen and his officers needed to receive orders from the Army Headquarters to continue advancing, though they all believed that this first success should be fully exploited "while the enemy was on the run". According to General Sinha, the recommendation to Delhi was "that we should continue our advance to Muzaffarabad on the Pakistan/ Kashmir border and demolish the two bridges on the border over the Kishanganga at Domel and Kohala. Our troops should withdraw immediately thereafter... The brigade group in the Valley would be available as mobile reserve to deal with any further incursions by the raiders which

in the circumstances appeared unlikely".

At that time, Muzaffarabad could have been liberated in a few days, but the Army Headquarters decided otherwise. The Army was ordered to stop its advance and divert its energy towards the garrison of Poonch. General Sinha says: "I have reasons to believe that the decision to go to the relief of Poonch was taken at the highest Government level at Delhi."

Even though it would have not been an easy task, General Sinha remarks: "Yet with all these attendant difficulties, I felt that an advance to Muzaffarabad, when the enemy was off balance, would have been a calculated risk, well worth taking. It would have perhaps drawn the final curtain over operations in the Valley."

General Sinha has several good arguments to prove that the "highest government level" functionaries committed a blunder and he concludes: "Perhaps our decision not to continue the advance to Muzaffarabad was a case of our permitting a unique opportunity to slip by."

What could have motivated the Government to abandon Muzaffarabad and Mirpur? The response is quite simple: These areas were ethnically, linguistically and culturally very different from the rest of the Valley. The Punjabi speaking-population of these areas was closer to one on the Pakistani side of the J&K State border. The Maharaja, who was the only unifying factor for all the areas such as Gilgit, Baltistan, Ladakh, the Valley or Jammu, complained bitterly to Sardar Patel that nothing was done to preserve the integrity of his State. On January 31 (the day, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated), he wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister: "The military situation as you know has been quite depressing since the arrival of Indian troops. Except the first gains in the Kashmir Valley there has been a debit balance throughout so far as

achievements are concerned."

The Maharaja was deeply unhappy that "after the recapture of Baramulla and Uri there has been a standstill. Two months have passed and the Indian troops are still at Uri." He pointed out the situation in "Azad-Kashmir": "In Mirpur district at the time when the Indian forces arrived we were still holding Mangla and our territory along the Jhelum Canal bank, but during the last two months we have lost Mangla, Alebeg, Gurdwara and the town of Mirpur... Not a single town has so far been recovered by the Indian troops."

He was so deeply upset that: "The name of the Indian Army is getting into the mud in spite of its brilliant record (during World War II)... The effort on the part of Pakistan is gaining ground every day. Their morale owing to success is going up. They loot property, they take away cattle." The problem for Hari Singh was that the "civil administration is now in the hands of the National Conference and military operations in the hands of the Indian Union".

The tragedy was that as far as the civil administration of Sheikh Abdullah was concerned, the regions of Muzaffarabad and Mirpur were of no interest to them. The local population was close to the Muslim Conference of Ghulam Abbas. Therefore, why make an effort for areas not falling in the National Conference's constituency? As for the Army, till the end of January 1948, the British generals were still all-powerful and directly received their orders from London which wanted to maintain the status quo at all cost.

The Maharaja was so dejected that he told Patel: "There is an alternative possible for me and that is to withdraw the accession." This was not acceptable to India. After consulting Nehru, Patel tried to calm down the Maharaja: "I can assure you that I am no less anxious about the Kashmir situation and what is happening in the UNO, but whatever

the present situation may be, a counsel of despair is entirely out of place."

Despair was not "out of place". The situation was totally bogged down in the battlefield and in the muddy waters of Lake Success, the UN Headquarters in New York; both scenarios had the full knowledge and support of His Majesty's government in London. Though the first passengers on the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad journey may not remember the history of this road, there is no doubt that a golden opportunity was lost during the months following the Accession: Indeed, their journey could have been entirely different.