

PEACE PROCESS GAINING PACE

The joint statement issued by the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Manmohan Singh, and Pakistan President, General Pervez Musharraf, after a meeting between the two leaders recently held in New Delhi that 'peace process between India and Pakistan is irreversible' heralds a new chapter in the relations between the two countries. It underlines the deep commitment of the leadership in both the countries to address the contentious issues which have beleaguered the relations between the two close neighbors for the last 57 years in their independent and sovereign existence. The thaw in the otherwise acrimonious relationship has taken place due to the realization that confrontations and belligerence produces marginal or even no results in the resolution of disputes.

The peace process between India and Pakistan seems to have acquired a pace. The resumption of a bus service between Indian part of Jammu & Kashmir and Pakistan held part of the state is the first indicator of this process. This Bus service which is plying between the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, Srinagar, and the capital of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, Muzaffarabad has brought cheers to the families who were divided due to the tribal raid from Pakistan in the year 1947, which later flared up as first full fledged war between India and Pakistan. The war ended in 1948 with a cease fire in which a line of control was drawn dividing the state into two parts. The state got further divided when Pakistan detached another part of the state, Gilgit-Baltistan, renaming it as 'Northern Areas'. The commencement of the Bus service connecting the people of the two parts which was hailed locally, nationally, regionally and globally is prodding both the governments to open other routes in the state which were closed after 1947-48 war to enlarge the area of interaction among the people living in different parts of the state. In a rare gesture of expression of solidarity with the peace initiative, the Government of India conceded the relaxing of mandatory requirement of traveling on Passports for the people of the two Kashmirs visiting each other. A new arrangement of travelling on documents issued by the local authorities was introduced. It needs to be acknowledged that these measures have generated a goodwill and strengthened the resolve of the people and the governments to sustain the peace initiatives.

It is axiomatic, in the situations of conflict, particularly in the areas which have suffered long spells of insurgency and militancy, that a class of conflict entrepreneurs emerges and develops a deep vested interest in keeping the violence and conflict going. No wonder that when the people, particularly the divided families in Jammu & Kashmir, were rejoicing the launch of Bus service that militants attempted to assassinate the passengers travelling in the bus from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad. These passengers had been earlier threatened to desist from travelling in the Bus, and Jammu & Kashmir state government had lodged them for the safety reason in the Tourist Reception Centre in Srinagar. In an attempt to attack the passengers, the one hundred year old historical building of Tourist Reception Centre, like many other historical buildings which were the symbols of rich cultural heritage of Kashmir, was gutted in the fire. The identity of these attackers remains a mystery but nonetheless signifies the urgency to identify these elements and isolate them. It may be appreciated that the Pakistan government lost no time in condemning the attack underlining its commitment to the processes of peace. However, Pakistan Government has to accentuate its efforts further in dealing with these enemies of peace. An overview of the media

in India, Pakistan including the Jammu & Kashmir state projects a refreshing overview of the peoples' support and appreciation for the peace initiatives, the reservations of the extremist and fundamentalist fringe elements in Pakistan and Jammu & Kashmir notwithstanding.

It equally needs to be recognised that the people-to-people contact in India and Pakistan has played a big role in dismantling the walls which had been erected due to mutual misunderstandings and suspicion. During the last two years, these contacts have acquired a momentum which seems to be impacting the state behaviour in a big way. This is an encouraging development and holds a promise to sustain the initiatives of peace.