
Fragile Kashmir, Costs and Hopes for Peace

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Opinion Paper

The recent decades have proved challenging for nations due to emergence and escalation of a wide variety of violent conflicts around the globe. Regardless of the motives, violent conflicts prove disastrous in all aspects- political, socio-cultural and economic. Needless to add, violent conflicts create atmosphere which stunts economic growth, destroys civic life and sows seeds of distrust, frustration and maligns future generations.

The modern development theories largely focus on conflict and development in a holistic framework. The cause or continuation of conflict in many cases is lack of development-economic or political or social or a combination of all. The relationship between conflict and development is strong and is a two way process: conflict retards development; and equally, failures in development substantially increase proneness to conflict. There arises a 'conflict trap' – a cycle of conflict-related violence and economic recession. In one of its reports in 1992 the then Secretary General of UN Security Council had pointed that among other things promotion of sustainable economic development is an important aspect of conflict prevention or resolution. Thus, inclusive development cannot be reserved for conflict-free environments rather it can be used to achieve one.

Studies from conflict-affected areas show that the economic reconstruction contributes positively to long-term political harmony. Development process should continue even during the conflict situation and the pace of development can be increased with peace attempts bringing fruits. Necessity of this is basically due to four reasons: to

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minimize the cost of the conflict; to provide means of survival to the people; to gradually defuse violent situations as, among many other things, poverty and under-development fuel violence in conflict situations; and to avoid the probability of a development vacuum in the post conflict situation to minimize the chances of conflict revival. Increasing globalization, trans-border exchanges and popular acceptance of democratic means for conflict resolution as added fruitfully to this discourse. And Kashmir is no exception to this. This emerging scenario appropriately fits into the discourse on Kashmir conflict that is quite complex. This conflict is pronounced as one of the most complicated situation wherein on the one side two nuclear powers are involved and on the other side the people of the Kashmir valley in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) developed alienation against the Indian federal rule.

The current scenario in Kashmir, taking into account its recently gained peace capital, can be utilized to stimulate development in the region with the help of private investors, voluntary organizations and international donors. The ongoing peace process has created a space in which both peace moves and development activities can go simultaneously. The development of the region can act as a deterrent against violence since violence has not only affected development of the state but also has brought innumerable losses for both India and Pakistan and the people of Kashmir. In the era of globalization when political issues are guided by the economic imperatives, it is necessary to bring the same realization into Kashmir. This would likely steer the ongoing peace process further and help realize a peaceful solution of the Kashmir issue.

Cost Overview

The costs of the Kashmir conflict are immense. As per the official estimates, about 40,000 lives have been lost since the onset of militancy in 1989 though other estimates put the toll much higher. Large-scale displacement from different parts of the state is an integral part of the Kashmir conflict. The author estimate around one million people have been displaced in the state due to internal and external dimension of the Kashmir conflict. Other humanitarian costs include

negative impact on vulnerable groups like women and children.

Though humanitarian costs are most of times intangible one can focus on the tangible economic costs that would be suffice in testifying fragility of Kashmir. The region has been left far behind in the rate of literacy and economy as per Census of India 2001. There is sharp increase in unemployment and poverty with the onset of violence since conflict has affected the important sources of livelihood of local people. Tourism, one of the main industries in the Kashmir valley, providing livelihood to thousands of people, has suffered tremendously due to violent activities. The number of tourists visiting the state per year had gone down from 600,000-700,000 in the pre-militancy days to a few thousands in the following years. It is estimated that the state lost 27 million tourists from 1989-2002 leading to tourism revenue loss to the tune of US \$ 3.6 billion. Violence has also directly affected other important sources of livelihood like agriculture, horticulture and handicraft industries. The forests of the state, which covered about eight thousand square miles, have also been among the principal casualties of the violence. The armed groups exploited the timber resources to earn money. The opportunity was also not lost by smugglers who took advantage of the situation leading to large-scale deforestation leading to not only loss of many flora and fauna species but also adversely affecting timber industry and contributing to environmental degradation. The state has also felt the direct impact of conflict in terms of huge damage caused by violent incidents, taking its toll on both public as well as private properties including gutting of hundreds of government buildings, educational buildings, hospitals, bridges, private houses and shops. Reportedly from 1989 to 2002, over 1,151 government buildings, 643 educational buildings, 11 hospitals, 337 bridges, 10729 private houses and 1,953 shops have been gutted in some 5,268 attacks on infrastructure. The enormity of economic damage due to militancy can be gauged by the fact that the estimates of damage till December 1996 were approximately INR 4 billion. Besides exacting extensive damage to the infrastructure of the region the violent conflict has

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discouraged private investment, pushing the economy towards stagnation.

It is like a vicious circle in which violence has led to underdevelopment and vice versa and in this gruesome scenario it is the common people of the region who suffered the most. A survey conducted by a British group, Market and Opinion Research International in the state in March 2002 pointed, 93 per cent of the respondent believed the correct way to bring peace to the region would be economic development, which can provide more job opportunities and reduce poverty. Thus, the revival of economy in Kashmir, endowed with not only rich flora and fauna and scenic beauty but also having a past record of rich economy partly due to its trade with neighbouring regions like China, Central Asia and West Asia via the famous Silk route, in the current peaceful atmosphere is quite important.

The Way Forward

In recent times, the situation has changed in the region quite remarkably. The ongoing peace process between India and Pakistan has provided the much-needed space in the region for development and restoration of peace. In October 2003, India proposed ten confidence-building measures for improving people-to-people contact and communication with Pakistan. It was followed by another historic development wherein a cease-fire, first formal truce between the two countries since the outbreak of militancy in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, came into effect on November 26, 2003 wherein firing on the Indo-Pak border in the region stopped almost completely. The culmination of these developments was the agreement between then Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and then Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to initiate a peace process including composite dialogue for peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues including Kashmir on the sidelines of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Summit meeting in January 2004. In April 2005 historic bus rolled from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad; in October 2005 both the countries opened the LOC to facilitate relief operation in the post earthquake scenario and later for movement of the people. The earthquake in October 2005 in a way showed the

necessity of cooperation between India and Pakistan to tackle many issues of common concern. It was a tragedy for both, but it was tragedy with lessons. Both the countries seemed to realize the necessity of peace than to indulge in political bickering. Though various formula have been floated and forwarded to resolve bilateral issues, the most important achievement has become the 'irreversibility' of the peace process though the Mumbai terror attack in November 2008 have caused concerns in this context. But, both India and Pakistan have come to realize the value of living in peace, because the peace-dividends are more valuable than the results of war and violence and hence there is all probability that the dialogue, which remains disrupted due to terror attack of 2008, would be resumed in the near future.

At the internal level, the Indian government to create conducive environment for negotiations launched a major peace mission. It was initiated by India by announcing a unilateral non-initiation of combat operations during the month of *ramzan* on November 19, 2000. The initiative was later extended twice. Another important step was broadening the democratic process in the state of J&K by holding the assembly elections in 2002 and in 2008 that have been widely recognized free and fair though the voter turn out was low.

To engage the people of Kashmir in the peace process the Government of India started talks with the All Party Hurriyat Conference (Moderate). The Hurriyat then emphasized on step-by-step approach for an honourable and durable solution of the conflict and it also appealed to the separatist groups to shun violence. Three round table conferences were organized (first in February 2006 in New Delhi, second in May 2006 in Srinagar and third in April 2007 in New Delhi) by the government of India to listen to varied voices within the state. Later five working groups were set up to look into various contentious issues confronting the state including promotion of Confidence Building Measures, strengthening relations across the LOC, economic development, promotion of good governance and strengthening centre-state relations. The setting of five working groups is an important step towards recognizing that peace and development has to go hand in hand. To win the 'hearts and minds' of the people, the prime minister of

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India also expressed concerns over human rights violations and promised steps to minimize them. Reportedly, the government of India has asked the security forces to carry out their 'difficult tasks in a humane manner.' The attempts together with the external dimension of the peace process have created a historic environment wherein the hopes regarding the possibility of a resolution of the complex problem remain high.

Noting two dimensions of the J&K conflict- internal and external- Manmohan Singh said "it is our intention and sincere desire to advance on both fronts towards resolving problems through a process of dialogue." With this realization on the part of India and Pakistan the time has become conducive to explore the full potential of the region by keeping people of the state at the centre stage. The ongoing peace process raises expectations for peace in Kashmir despite occasional hurdles. Pakistan President Zardari's rejection of violent elements in the peace process and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's offer of treaty of peace and friendship are some of welcome developments in this regard. This sincerity and realization needs to be reflected in a pro-active economic reconstruction of the devastated region.

Various other steps that can lead to economic reconstruction include attracting private investments, working in collaboration with the international financial institutions, developing infrastructure and promoting industrialization, reviving the indigenous sources of livelihoods like tourism and agriculture, exploring new areas of revenue generation etc. A sustained and sincere development can thus provide a fertile ground for decrease in violence and increase in negotiations. The economic reconstruction and development coupled with sensitive handling of the volatile situation by all the parties involved in the conflict can lead to sobering of this protracted conflict and bring peace in the region with local, regional as well as international implications. The fragility of Kashmir has brought tremendous adversity and it is the time to act and strengthen the region by both political as well as economic means.