

THOUGHT OF THE DAY — Akh Gaw Jaen Yaar Byakh Gaw Na'an Yaar (One is a friend for life one is just a fair weather friend) | Kashmiri Proverb

Playing Chicken with Pakistan

In the process New Delhi has pitched itself and the separatist leadership at the same level



STATECRAFT

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New Delhi's decision to call off the August 25 Foreign Secretary level talks with Islamabad in response to the latter's unwillingness to stop consulting the Kashmiri separatists is counterproductive and short-sighted even as such a populist act makes perfect electoral sense for the BJP in the run up to the Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) where it looks to make unprecedented electoral gains.

On the face of it, New Delhi's argument for calling off the talks might look logical and based on national interest. But a deeper analysis would show that there are a number of problems with the rationale for doing so. First of all, discussions between the separatists and Pakistani diplomats/politicians have never led to anything. For the most part, these discussions have been symbolic and at best, an irritant. More importantly, ever since Pervez Musharraf gave a new direction to Pakistan's Kashmir policy, Pakistan has been cold-shouldering the Kashmiri separatists, especially Ali Shah Geelani who, as a result, has become very critical of Pakistan's new Kashmir policy. And the Kashmiri separatists have also often reminded Pakistan that there is a need to discuss the situation in Pakistan Administered Kashmir as well. Now, with one strike, New Delhi has undone all that and forced a new friendship between the separatists and Islamabad: a classic diplomatic self-goal.

BJP's 'Mission Kashmir'

This sudden move by the Modi government should also be seen as an important piece in BJP's evolving electoral strategy for winning a significant number of seats in the upcoming Assembly elections in J&K so as to play a major role in the government formation in the state.

Finding potential partners in Kashmir, which it is currently engaged in, is a major part of this mission. Consolidating the non-Muslim vote in J&K is another major part of this strategy. In this context, the earlier statements by BJP on Article 370 and the return of Pandits to Kashmir, and now calling off the talks with Pakistan form part of a well-considered strategy to increase the party's popularity in Jammu and even in parts of Kashmir.

On the other hand, in Kashmir, denial of its 'representative role' by New Delhi will force the separatists to strengthen their poll boycott calls. The boycott call by the separatists, and BJP's increasing popularity in Jammu and Ladakh, could lead to the emergence of BJP as a key player in post-poll J&K. This then is a game being well played by BJP.

Whether or not one likes it, the Indian state needs the Kashmiri separatists if it wishes to bring about genuine peace and reconciliation in the valley.

Implications for Kashmir

New Delhi's relationship with Kashmir's separatist leadership is far more complex than it is often recognized. Both India and Pakistan have funded separatist groups in the Valley, promoted one over the other depending on the political climate, played one against the other, and engaged in overt and covert negotiations with them. Indeed, New Delhi, over last two decades, has understood the 'importance' of the Kashmiri separatists, especially the moderate ones, and as a result they have been a crucial part of New Delhi's containment strategy in the valley. Over the past few years, however, the influence of the moderate Kashmiri dissidents in the valley has been steadily diminishing among the valley's alienated youth even as Geelani's, the most hawkish of them all, popularity has only increased. New Delhi's objection to the meeting between the Pakistan High Commissioner

and the separatists will only improve Geelani's standing in the eyes of the Kashmiris. This will be damaging for New Delhi's long-term strategy to contain the Kashmir insurgency.

Kashmiri separatists have consistently argued that there are three parties to the Kashmir conflict: New Delhi, Islamabad and Kashmiris, an argument vehemently rejected by New Delhi. Now, by engaging in a public spat with Islamabad based on the logic "either us or the separatists", New Delhi has not only pitched itself and the separatist leadership at the same level but also unwittingly admitted that the separatists are a party to the Kashmir conflict.

Portraying Kashmiri separatism through the political articulations of Geelani, in a sense, does help the Indian state in arguing that Kashmiri separatism is essentially anti-India and Pro-Pakistan (which is fundamentally misleading). However, such arguments tend to paint Kashmir's non-mainstream politics with the same brush and silence the reasonable voices of Kashmir's moderate dissidents. This, as a result, delegitimises the genuine demands of the Kashmiris in the eyes of the Indian public and help fan separatist passions in the Valley. The reality is that, whether or not one likes it, the Indian state needs the Kashmiri separatists if it wishes to bring about genuine peace and reconciliation in the valley.

Implications for Indo-Pak relations

By calling off the meeting between the two Foreign Secretaries, the Modi government has convoluted a bilateral dialogue process that was beginning to take a positive direction after the 'historic' meeting between the two Prime Ministers. There is no clarity as of now whether or not the other scheduled Indo-Pak engagements will take place. Given that the Modi government has indirectly set a pre-condition for future talks, it will be perceived as fickle-minded if future interactions indeed take place without Pakistan having conceded to the Indian demand *vis-à-vis* Kashmiri separatists. On the other hand, if the "Islamabad should only talk to us or we won't talk at all" logic applies to future interactions as well, New Delhi will eventually be forced to get down from its diplomatic high horse or risk not having a dialogue process with Islamabad at all. It is indeed a bizarre logic to argue that a

bilateral Indo-Pak dialogue process is only useful for Pakistan, not India. The reality is that India needs a dialogue process as much as Pakistan needs it. In reality, no government in Pakistan can become popular by talking to India, but every Pakistani government does so because they realize its importance. New Delhi, therefore, needs to shed the illusion that by engaging in a bilateral dialogue, it is doing a favor to Islamabad. In any case, Islamabad has not been too pleased with the ongoing dialogue with New Delhi as the former thinks that the talks are progressing on terms set by the latter. For instance, the contemporary Indo-Pak dialogue has three broad focal areas: acts of terrorism against India, trade and transit, all of which are important for New Delhi, not so much for Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistan would like more progress on finding a political solution for Kashmir and resolving the Siachen standoff both of which are not emphasized by the current dialogue process. So how is it that India is in any way 'hurting' Pakistani interests by calling off a dialogue which Islamabad thinks is going in India's favour?

From a long-term strategic point of view, attempts by New Delhi to achieve stability in Kashmir without giving Pakistan an honorable exit will not be an enduring one. And that is precisely what Islamabad is looking for vis-à-vis Kashmir: an honorable exit from the mess that Kashmir has become for Pakistan's life as a nation. The Kashmir formula proposed by Pervez Musharraf was exactly one such honorable way out. Even today, the broad contours of such a formula, minus the Musharraf tag, have great traction within Pakistan's political class.

Moreover, New Delhi's decision to call off the engagement with Pakistan comes at a time when it needs to proactively engage with Islamabad for a number of reasons. The implications of the NATO drawdown from Afghanistan and the stunning military exploits of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are still not properly understood even as they are unfolding not too far from India. Therefore, sustaining a stable relationship with Islamabad is important for New Delhi when considering the long-term strategic implications of the geopolitical churning that is taking place in its near abroad.

Grave New World

With graveyards as real estate, burial becomes business

WRITE HAND

AJAZ-UL-HAQUE

Our is the world of marketing where everything sells. Everything - including our burial places. If on one hand the space for the living is expanding no end, on the other the space for the dead is shrinking fast. With land costs shooting uncontrollably high, affording a graveyard is taking monstrous proportions. Earlier graves yawning ready for all rich and poor, now the access is limited. With people migrating to newer places, the immediate and the unavoidable need - after constructing a house - is to buy a piece of land that decently covers our naked bodies and saves them from vultures to feed on. We have still *mohallas* where land has been dedicated with a nominal maintenance charges from the locals. But in the sprawling suburbs you have to pay lacs for inches. Add to it the craze of the rich few who maintain their status even for their dead. They choose kanals of land for a single grave as if their dead take a morning walk to feel

Flatten the old graveyards after a particular time span so that the space is cleared for the new entries.

freshener underneath the soil. That's degeneration which money causes in some cases. Moreover they have a tendency to strike with a distinction which doesn't go even after death. Again the 'privileged' amongst us want the graves of their dead to be walled up. They build mini-houses and get them plastered with the names and accomplishments (as if their dead have to reapply for a promotion in the dark hole filled with ants, worms and moles). We don't debate the lawful and the prohibited in religion, here the problem is practical with no scope for spiritual interpretations. If graveyards spring up everywhere, the living will have a luxury to buy as much as they want, where will the dead go? We can prevent humans from being born, but can't keep them from dying. Government will have to legislate in this matter. Civil Society, religious groups - all will have to find a solution. Like we demolish old structures to pave way for the new ones, we can flatten the old graveyards after a particular time span so that the space is cleared for the new entries. That alone can save us from converting our valley into a big graveyard. Why not to limit land-selling and notify certain areas as graveyards. Government can collect a one-time affordable token fee from people so that dying doesn't cost the way living does.

Us and the shepherds

The cracking of dawn at Kungwatan has its own beauty

NOSTALGIA

ZGM

On seeing a spectacular vast track of the meadow, spreading over miles, we were swooned with delight. Thousands and thousands of wild flowers tossing their heads at a slight breeze and filling the air with fragrance made us believe we had entered a place, 'fair as a garden of the Lord'. On seeing the clouds of all shapes just sailing over our heads, the kid in me was reborn. Excited! I started running after these clouds as I used to run after my paper boats during heavy rains in the overflowing pond in the backyard of our home. Shepherds tending their flocks - droves of sheep and goats up to precipices of cliffs and lots of white lambs frolicking and jumping like frogs on dangerous track made me sing and join in chorus with Marlow:

*"The Shepherds' Swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love."*

No one could tell me why the meadow was named as Kungwatan. Perhaps, someone in the past might have compared this grand basket of white, yellow and purple flowers to crocus on a mount. It was a moment of great joys, when we spotted from a distance an old wooden two story house - perhaps constructed some thirty years back. The paper chit from the handsome Director Tourism resembling European Sahib worked like magical key and opened for us doors of the best furnished rooms in the guest house. Greeting us with a smile, the Chowkidar of the hut looked like a mythical being. His name has evaporated from my memory but a photograph clicked with small box camera continues to be part of precious memories of trekking in the meadows. In his traditional attire - a long *pheran*, with woollen Kashmiri *chadder* (blanket) wrapped over his *pheran*, he resembled Hebrews - followers of Moses and Aaron believed to have arrived in Kashmir thousands of years back and settled in this land along with other eleven tribes from far and near lands.

He and his son, prepared nice food for us - a wild cock in onions and a wild vegetable *pambhak* - rhubarb. Maize flour bread, rhubarb cooked in oil and spices and buttermilk is principal food of nomadic goatherds and shepherds living in alpine meadows. I and my mates did not like the rhubarb dish. But tasted it, for it having been main food of our patron saint of Kashmir, Sheikh Noor-U-Din for almost twelve years, when he was mediating in a forest cave. After sun glided behind towering cedars and pines and everything around got drowned in eerie silence broken only by wheezing rustle of pine trees the caretaker of the guest house turned a story teller for us. Narrating stories of shepherds saving their flocks from ferocious animals under the flickering light of his precious possession, a kerosene lantern, he turned mystical. Every story with its magical power straight way travelled into our hearts. He had bagfull of stories about the European trekkers and their adventures on way to Kounsarnag. He remembered names of many officers, he had served for years together. He remembered the day when, as a young man, he and his father had welcomed top Kashmir leader Sheikh Abdullah with his guests, including Mrs. Gandhi, who had stayed at this high altitude guest house in 1940s. Forest officers like Syed Noor-ul-Hassan in their late eighties have many stories to tell about trekking of Mrs. Gandhi and others from the Nehru family in mountains of Kashmir and staying in the forest guest houses in deep forests....No chronicler has documented these travels.

Cracking of dawn at Kungwatan has its own beauty.



DELHI DURBAR

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After all Parliamentarians

It seems some niceties are still left among the Parliamentarians when the unparliamentary language is becoming order of the day. The in-House unparliamentary acts have a strong potential of spilling out in the open also given the grammar used by them to roun-down each other.

How could have one perceived an encounter between Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi on one side and BJP veteran Dr Murlidhar Joshi considered a hardliner within his party? The passers-by were surprised on seeing humility exhibited by both sides when they faced each other while walking towards the Central Hall of Parliament

after their House duties were over. The *Lucknow* and *az of 'pehle aap, pehle aap'* immediately unfolded from both the sides to the utter amusement of those who witnessed this pleasant encounter.

Mr Rahul Gandhi was the first to walk-aside and offer passage to octogenarian BJP MP Dr Joshi and urged him to have the privilege of passing first. 'Pehle aap', he reportedly insisted. A similar gesture was shown by his mother also and told Mr Joshi that he has the first right to passage.

An erudite scholar by himself, Dr Joshi was not found lagging in humility and insisted that the Gandhis go first. 'Pehle aap' was again at play in true Lucknowi style.

Interestingly, the witness to this pleasant incident was no other than External Affairs Minister Mrs Sushma Swaraj who following close-by. Known for her mannerisms and humility and best of relationship with opposition leaders led by Mrs Gandhi, was heard joking that if none of them wished to go, let her have the privilege.

So the humour survives in the midst of acrimony and distrust.

Finally Rajya Sabha

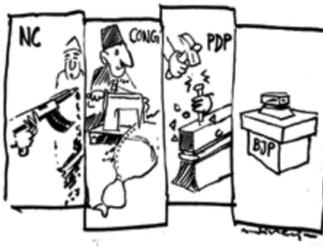
Is he following in the foot-steps of his illustrious senior party colleague Mr Digvijay Singh? It seems so when former Congress MP from Mumbai Mr Sanjay Nirupam vowed not to enter the precincts of Parliament House until he is elected again. He lost the recent Lok Sabha election from Mumbai north to BJP's Gopal Shetty.

The most vocal Parliamentarian of Congress, he is every now and then being asked whether he has become Mr Singh's disciple in this regard. The latter had gone on a 10 year sabbatical from contesting elections after the Congress under his leadership lost Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh. Mr Singh was chief minister for two consecutive terms.

The catch line is that despite his 10-year self-imposed exile from electoral politics having ended, he has not dared till now to contest an election again despite his name having been circulated during last Lok Sabha elections. Ultimately, he has found himself in Rajya Sabha.

Will Mr Nirupam find the same route and end up in Rajya Sabha?

Sunday slice



Don't swat that fly...

...it may yet save your life!



SALT 'N' PEPPER

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My friend GM is a strange fellow and as strange fellows will he does the strangest things sometimes. Like we were sitting in his garden some days back and a housefly landed on the tray which held some remnants of tea and biscuits that we had had a while back. As a natural instinct I rolled up the magazine in my hand to swat the dirty little insect. But before I could accomplish my self-assigned duty of an executioner and carry out this death sentence the rapidly descending magazine was arrested in mid-flight by my friend who intercepted it taking a blow on his outstretched arm. "DON'T!" he cried out loudly for emphasis. The till then unwary fly got alerted by the commotion and made a rapid escape.

"Hey what the...!" I was naturally taken aback by my friend's

strange action. "You almost killed the little fellow! Thank God it got away safely," he actually heaved a sigh of relief as he said this.

"Hey what's with you man! So much fuss over a miserable housefly!" Now of course I am kind of used to my friend's strange ways having known him since our childhood days but this had beaten all previous records of his eccentric behavior.

"Miserable housefly! Why this miserable housefly might save your life some day!" he said, wagging his finger at me.

"Now I got it! You have been reading too many fairy tales," I said. "I thought houseflies are supposed to be dirty and cause diseases and here you are saying that these might save my life someday."

"Well science is always making new discoveries and challenging old theories and myths. It is not unusual for doctors to declare something as injurious and then sometime later extol its virtues," he put forth his argument adding, "Flies have turned out to be good for health."

"Flies! Flies! Flies! You make it sound like these are a boon for mankind. Lifesavers indeed! You

really got a fly in your bonnet! What is it all about?" I said with an amused chuckle.

"I will tell you. But first let me ask you a question. If you are given a choice between buying...um... say sweets from a shop that is full of flies or another shop where not even a single housefly can be seen what will you do?"

"What a silly question! I will prefer the more hygienic shop the one without any flies that is, wouldn't you!"

"No! Let me tell you I won't even look at your 'hygienic' shop but go straight away to the one which is full of houseflies," he said with a supercilious smile.

"Given your obvious love affair with these filthy little creatures I won't be surprised!" was my exasperated response.

At this point he handed over a newspaper to me and said, "Read this". He was pointing at a news item titled "To keep flies away, butcher caught spraying insecticides on

"Given your obvious love affair with these filthy little creatures I won't be surprised!"

mutton'. As I read through the news report I broke out into cold sweat. A butcher had really been caught spraying insecticide over meat to keep flies away and the municipal authorities had immediately seized the poisoned mutton and booked the fellow for endangering the lives of humans and animals. By 'animals' of course they meant dogs which are a close second to Kashmir's human population in meat consumption especially in this wedding season, it being an openly admitted fact that the SMC authorities are particularly concerned about these four legged creatures.

"What is the matter? Why have you turned pale?" GM asked me in a voice full of concern. "I...well I took a large quantity of meat yesterday. You see I had gone to attend my cousin's marriage. What if the meat had been sprayed with insecticide?!" I said in an alarmed tone.

"Are you feelings any symptoms of poisoning?" he asked.

"Well I wouldn't know. I have no previous experience in the matter. I did take a lot of meat though, not only a bellyful of *wazwan* for dinner but earlier I had gone to the backyard where the *wazas* (chefs) were preparing the

delicacies for a sampler or two. But wait! Now that I remember the whole place was teeming with flies which were covering almost all of the laid out meat, minced, pounded or otherwise. Seeing all those flies I even remember jokingly telling the chief *waza*. 'The *baraatis* are already here! Hey that means the meat wasn't poisoned doesn't it! I am saved thanks to your flies!" I really felt relieved by the memory of those houseflies.

GM just gave me a smug smile. A short while later he accompanied me to the gate of his house. Once outside my eyes fell upon the municipal dumper just opposite his gate. The overflowing dumper was swarming with flies, hundreds of thousands of them.

"Wow!" I said, "Look at that! It seems that your municipality guys have woken up to the potential of your tiny winged friends for this sure looks like one of their breeding farm for flies!"

GM strode away in a huff and went inside slamming the door in my face. Such a touchy guy!

(Truth is mostly unpalatable...but truth cannot be ignored! Here we serve the truth, seasoned with salt and pepper and a dash of sauce (lies!). You can record your burps, belches and indigestion, if any, at snp_ajazbaba@yahoo.com)