

India and Pakistan: 63 Years Later

Wednesday 1 December 2010, by [KHAN Arshad M.](#) (Date first published: 30 August 2010).

If you read *India Today*, you are left with the impression that India is an English-speaking land of billionaire businessmen, larded squabbling politicians and scandal-prone movie stars all living in fabulous houses. If you visit the country, one whiff of the air outside your air-conditioned city hotel dispels the myth.

August 15 is India's Independence Day. Pakistan, the little country that thought it could but couldn't, pipped it by one day and celebrates on August 14. It is now 63 years since Independence, so what have these countries achieved aside from destructive wars within and against each other and a standard of living that is by any measure about the worst in the world with the exception of certain blighted regions of Africa.

To make a point, on Pakistan's Independence Day, Balochis attacked and killed a dozen and more non-Balochis in Balochistan province. It is both a spillover effect from the war in Afghanistan and the resentment they feel in the use of their own resources – natural gas and minerals – by the rest of the country while development in Balochistan is neglected. Continuing along the border with Afghanistan, the Pashtuns' sympathy lies with their brethren on the other side. And as the Pakistan military tries vainly to assert control, attacks and bombings in major population centers have mushroomed.

India fares little better. Far from celebrating Independence Day, the Kashmiri Moslems were out demonstrating in tens of thousands despite recent killings of protesters. It's nothing new as estimates of civilians killed since the troubles began range from 40,000 to 100,000. Things are quieter on the Pakistani side as those residents do not feel discriminated against. But quite probably, the Kashmiris would rather be rid of both and have an autonomous State of their own.

Kashmir is not the only insurrection India faces. What started forty-three years ago as a peasant rebellion in Naxalbari, West Bengal is now a full-fledged guerrilla war led by the Maoist faction of the Communist Party of India. It affects twenty of India's twenty-eight States though the worst killings – by government supported militias and Naxalites (Maoists) of local farmers caught in between – have been occurring in Chattisgarh and Jharkhand. The cause? Quite simply a land grab by powerful industrial corporations who claim they will bring development and jobs.

Tell that to a farmer in a land with rich soil earning twice the national average. Now his own master, uneducated but with knowledge of farming in his bones and love of his land, he would be exchanging this freedom for life as a lowly servant subject to the whims of his masters. He has chosen to fight and die if need be; not unlike the Kashmiris, the Balochis, the Pushtoons and others across the Subcontinent. Is Nepal a harbinger in this context?

The stupidity and ridiculous nature of the India-Pakistan conflict is highlighted by a current simple fact. The present Prime Ministers of both countries are ethnic Punjabis. It means they can speak to each other in their mother tongue. However, the people from other provinces in their respective countries would not be able to understand them. As Punjab constitutes a large part of Pakistan, Manmohan Singh, the Indian Prime Minister, is understood by a vastly larger proportion of Pakistanis than Indians! The problem, the countries face, is a religious sectarianism encouraged by

the British in India similar to the French "solution" in Lebanon and what we have recently done in Iraq.

The economic picture for either country is also not particularly rosy, especially in comparison with neighbors other than Bangladesh and, of course, Afghanistan. India has the lowest life expectancy; Pakistan only slightly better. Their similar GNI per capita is roughly half that of Bhutan or Sri Lanka and one seventh of Malaysia, also a former British colony; it is also a third that of China (perhaps even less as the Chinese currency is undervalued). What is more significant is the virtually new infrastructure in China, the trains, roads, ports, etc. It is interesting to observe also that while India is becoming a call-center hub offering relatively low-skilled jobs, China is already the world's factory generating well-paid manufacturing jobs for its people.

Whereas the Olympic Games hosted by China demonstrated the nation's emergence as a superpower-to-be, the almost farcical preparation for the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi, coming this Oct. 3rd, is in stark contrast. The enterprise is beset by corruption scandals, cost overruns of an order of magnitude, inefficiency, incompetence and bureaucratic infighting. It is sad and painful to watch. Of course, Pakistan would not have fared any better – just look at the response to the floods.

These floods in Pakistan, devastating as they have been, do offer an opportunity for India to extend a helping hand. The \$5 million contribution to the relief fund is a good start. But it is an intangible swamped in the pool of aid from other countries. Imagine India providing direct and immediate relief in the form of food, tents, helicopters to ferry sorely needed supplies, and volunteers, even the military, who will be seen by Pakistanis as helpers in this catastrophe rather than in the familiar role of enemy. It would dramatically alter the Pakistani mind-set, and assuage the anger at the treatment of their Kashmiri brethren. Of course it is going to take many more confidence building measures by both sides before the nukes no longer stand ready for mutual annihilation.

What of the future? One can easily visualize the Indian Subcontinent in a political and economic model not unlike the European Common Market. In such a scenario, a semi-autonomous Kashmir might well finesse the whole thorny problem of who it belongs to. Listening to the grievances of their minorities, listening to each other, would lay the foundation for stability in the region. Otherwise, the two countries will continue to waste resources on military spending and to muddle through, lagging further and further behind colonial contemporaries like Malaysia.

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August 30th, 2010

P.S.

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