

A SYMPOSIUM ON KASHMIR IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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During the past decade, this reporter has had the opportunity of covering numerous events reflective of the Pakistani and the Muslim-Kashmiri perspective on the situation in Jammu and Kashmir. And keeping this in mind, when I heard that a major symposium on this bloody conflict was being held in Northern California on June 9th, staged by the Kashmiri-Hindu Pandit minority, I decided to go to hear and report on what the other side is thinking these days. What I was interested in was a Kashmiri-Pandit point of view because come what may, one cannot disregard the fact that this community is a part and parcel of the Kashmir problem, and has the same legitimate right of self determination which is being denied the Kashmiri Muslim majority for quite some time now by the Government of India. And what one could also consider an added bonus at this event was the opportunity to hear both some current (elected) official and unofficial (think tank) views of the on this problem (notice that the word Dispute is being avoided here thus far) from the United States.

Titled From Paradise To Ideological Battleground: A Symposium On The Kashmir Conflict, presented by the Indo-American Kashmir Forum, this all-day event was held at the Newark-Fremont Hilton. The symposium was conducted in two major parts: The Political aspect and discussion from 10:00 AM to 4:15 PM and the evening Cultural Program from 6:30 PM to Midnight (which this reporter unfortunately could not attend). We will deal exclusively with the day program here. After the official introduction to the program by its convener Jeevan Zutshi, the discussion was broken up into four main parts. Starting with Session I: Historical Perspective, and a youth Perspective, Session II: Impact of Insurgency, a break for lunch and a Keynote Speech by Congressman Jim McDermott a Co-Chair of the India Caucus in Washington. Session III: Restoring Normalcy and finally Session IV: Framework for Peace. Each session was followed by a question and answer period. I had strong disagreements on the Historical Perspective presented but one needs not be reminded that the Kashmir problem is actually the result of a differing interpretation of history. Needless to say, no Pakistani would have been impressed by the presentations given by Professor D.R. Sardesai and Hira L. Fotedar. But it was the surprise (?) inclusion of Youssef Bodansky, Director of the U.S, Congressional Task Force on Terrorism (Washington D.C.) in that session that certainly would attract much attention amongst both Pakistanis and Kashmiri Muslims. Mr. Bodansky started his presentation and continued throughout by lambasting Pakistan's Kashmir Policy and specifically its ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) unit for just about all that ails that part of the world. He said that he was very pessimistic about Kashmir and that "we will be meeting again and again" because he saw no solution in sight. He described Kashmir as a classical case of Islamic State Sponsorship of a Liberation Movement and the subversion of the Kashmir movement into an Islamic movement. It was clear where Dr. Bodansky's sympathies lay and why he was invited to this gathering, because he seemed to have very little sympathy for Pakistan. I tried to corner him with a couple of questions during the lunch break during which he seemed to listen carefully on what I had to say from the Pakistani viewpoint, but he would not budge from his position while not being as abrasive as he was during his speech.

The Youth Perspective presented next by young Kashmiri-American Nidhi Bhat, was very well received by all including this Pakistani-American. I just wanted to add here that what Nidhi talked about is also what we all wish for in the Kashmir context. But I beg to differ that it just maybe India, which is currently perpetuating this sad situation. On the Impact of the Insurgency, anyone that cares to know anything about Kashmir knows how dirty this war has been and the impact it has had not only on the Kashmiri-Pandits but also the entire region. Moderated by Dr. Rajiv Pandit from Chicago, everyone was very impressed by the

presentation of Indian Consul General R.M. Abhyankar. He spoke of the use of military force in this complex problem, the recent cease fire that did not really work and of Pakistan's own inability to control these groups fighting in Kashmir. He said that we should "watch the developments" for the next few weeks or months. The Honorable Consul General seemed to be a lot more hopeful than Mr. Bodansky earlier. But it was the brave presentation by Kashmiri Mumtaz Wani, an attorney from Washington D.C. which really moved me, even if he did ruffle a few feathers at this gathering. "For twelve years you have been fighting the insurgency and you have failed" he said. "This is a Kashmiri problem. We have to resolve it" he added. "Taking sides will take us nowhere. On the exodus of the Pandits he said, "empty houses are not signs of glory in Kashmir". But one also has to add that Capt. L. K. Tikoo (Ret.) from Jammu and Kashmir had very little that was helpful to say. His views were as unrealistic as those of some of the later speakers. If the militancy could have been crushed, it would have happened by now. After Lunch the Keynote speech by Congressman Jim McDermott from the State of Washington was I believe the beginning of diplomatic U.S. input into this gathering. The Congressman did say he believed that "Kashmir is an integral part of Secular India" (amidst applause). "However we have an interest in the stability of Pakistan" (one could not escape such aspects of his speech). He also said that he was currently "feeling optimistic and that there was a "strong impulse for peace, today in the region". He said that "until the question of Kashmir is resolved, India may not be able to play its regional power role". He also added, that "to cut Islamabad out of the loop now would be very ill advised". He also mentioned that: "There is no perfect solution. But if we wait for the perfect solution. His presentation was the first indication of some sympathy for the Musharraf Government in Pakistan by the Americans at this meeting. The Restoring Normalcy Session Moderated by Dr. Vijay Sazawal included panelists Ambassador Howard Schaffer, Professor SarDesai and Dr. D.N.Munshi. The very soft-spoken Dr. Schaffer whose association with the Kashmiris goes way back knows very well, of the sufferings of all the people there including that of the Pandits. He said that "no solution could be successful "unless the situation on the ground improves". He added that "Kashmir needs to be dealt with as a political problem". He said, "Kashmir is originally a home grown problem, a result of serious Indian mismanagement. He added that what was important today is "the beginning of a dialogue between India and Pakistan". He also mentioned that it was a mistake to stop the Hurriyat leadership from going to Pakistan. Ambassador Schaffer's was the second indicator of some sympathy for the Pakistani call for dialogue. If one could get over the sheer wit and humor of Dr. SarDesai during which he said nothing (I'm being unfair here because I completely agreed with him when he said "What we are looking for is a durable peace, not a convenient peace"), and move on to Dr. Munshi's calling the Kashmiris of the Valley a being "pampered", this was a very vigorous and important session. The final segment moderated by Dr. Rajiv Pandit featured Ambassador Teresita Schaffer, Director South Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Dr. Sazawal and Professor George C Thomas. It would not be inaccurate here if I mentioned that beyond the spirit of reciprocity and the general goodwill that I have towards the Pandits, it was the presence of Mrs. Schaffer that attracted this reporter to this symposium. Ever since she had literally "delivered" the LOC as a border to India in her earlier statements, I was extremely curious about her and was not surprised that she was invited to this program I wanted to know what she had to say about the upcoming Musharraf-Vajpayee Summit and peace process. So I made sure that she had completed her address before I left for my next engagement. Mrs. Schaffer started by "talking about talks". "You need a process, and that does require communication ", she said. "It will not move smoothly", she added. "This is a marathon and not a sprint". She also mentioned the problems of cohesive leadership within India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris (especially). "None are going to achieve all its goals" she said. "Everyone will have to give up something". She elaborated with "All three would need to be satisfied enough with the solution", which would have to be 1) Peaceful, 2) Honorable and 3) Practical. She added to this by asking who the

winner and loser would be in this peace process. She said, "India, the country would definitely win. But a Government of India who bought peace would take a risk. She went on to say "Pakistan would benefit tremendously. But the risk to the Government that made peace would be far greater". On the Kashmiris, she said that "they win" but that the "guest fighters and the National Conference lose". And with a note of caution she did add that all involved could also prevent a settlement from happening. "Each of the three constituencies can be part winners" she said. "The peace process itself has marginalized extremist elements". She ended by talking about the need to persuade the governments and people involved to accept a "Partial Solution ". No one can be disappointed with Mrs. Schaffer's views because they reflect reality. We all know what the "status quo" is, and it is not acceptable. No military solution is in sight or realistically feasible. So where do we go from here? We have several million Kashmiri Muslims who are country-less in their own homes. And over 300,000 Kashmiri Hindu (Pandits) are homeless in their own country. One hopes that the Musharraf-Vajpayee Summit will keep this fact in mind. There are 1.3 billion people who have high hopes that this will not be a cold Delhi day in July.

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