SYMBIOSIS OF PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT IN KASHMIR: AN IMPERATIVE FOR CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

WRITTEN BY DEBIDATTA AUROBINDA MAHAPATRA

Kashmir, in its current situation, represents a case of symbiosis of peace and development. The current post-violence scenario has reinforced the link between peace and development in the trouble-torn region, and has indicated how the peace process has penetrated to the grassroots and invoked a spirit of participatory development in the Kashmiri people. This article argues that the peace process has provided the required ambience for the launch of sustainable development initiatives in the conflict-ridden region. The dawn of peace in Kashmir – referred to as “sunrise” – has widened prospects of peace through economic development. In fact, the region has never had such an opportunity to build peace through economic reconstruction. This article, while delineating these broad themes of peace and development, will also briefly look at how the conflict has exacted heavy damage on civilians, and how the peace process has provided the impetus to initiate development measures.

Costs of Conflict

The erstwhile princely state of Kashmir is currently divided between India (where it is referred to as Jammu and Kashmir, or J&K), Pakistan (where it is called ‘Azad’

Above: Tourism, one of Kashmir’s main industries, has suffered tremendously due to violence in the region. The state has lost billions of dollars in tourism revenue.
Jammu and Kashmir, or AJK) and China. A source of contention between India and Pakistan, the Kashmir conflict has resulted in immense human and material losses for both countries, through four wars and occasional border skirmishes. The onset of militancy in the Indian state of J&K – which started in the late 1980s and continued for nearly two decades – further complicated the volatile situation in the region. The militancy started as a bid for independence from India, and added to the costs of conflict substantially.

Although there is no consensus about the estimated costs of the conflict, the fact remains that the conflict has caused extensive damage to infrastructure, livelihoods, the social fabric of society, and the environment. The findings of the pre-budget Economic Survey 2007-08, conducted by the government of India, presented a grim picture on all major fronts.1 Tourism, one of the main industries in the region, has suffered tremendously due to violent activities. It has declined substantially since the late 1980s, when
militancy gained momentum. The number of tourists visiting the state per year reduced from about 7 million in the pre-militancy days to a few thousand in the following years. It is estimated that the state lost 27 million tourists from 1989 to 2002, leading to a tourism revenue loss of US$ 3.6 billion.\(^2\)

Violence has also directly affected other important sources of livelihood such as agriculture, horticulture and the handicraft industry. Infrastructure, too, has suffered immensely. From 1989 to 2002, some 1 151 government buildings, 643 educational buildings, 11 hospitals, 337 bridges, 10 729 private houses and 1 953 shops have been gutted in about 5 288 attacks.\(^3\) The enormity of economic damage due to militancy is evident in the estimates of damage that occurred, estimated at approximately 4 billion Indian rupees (INR) until December 1996 alone.\(^4\)

More importantly, the conflict damaged the cohesive nature of Kashmiri society, rupturing the composite Kashmiri culture that was traditionally moulded by the Sufi saints. It is worth mentioning that the split in the composite culture – also referred to as Kashmiriyat – led to the mass exodus of people in particular communities, such as the Pandits, as they were afraid for their lives in the Muslim-dominated valley. The violent atmosphere also induced a sense of resignation and frustration. The common people, caught between the guns of the militants and the security forces, were more concerned about their survival than about engaging in productive social and economic activities.

**Peace and Development**

The post-Cold War world has witnessed many remarkable developments. Conventional territorial
boundaries and related disputes have been challenged by increasing globalisation, transborder cultural exchanges and the popular acceptance of democratic means for conflict resolution. This trend is equally applicable to the Kashmir conflict, which is far more complex, owing to multiple players – Indian, Pakistani, Kashmiri and other international actors. In 1998, both India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons and, in 1999, the Kargil crisis beckoned on these two foremost rival nations in South Asia with possibilities of nuclear confrontation, thus necessitating a process of dialogue with pressure from the international community. In October 2003, India proposed a number of confidence-building measures for improving people-to-people contacts and communications by road, rail and sea between the two countries. A truce accord between the two countries came into effect on 26 November 2003 along the India-Pakistan international border, the Line of Control (LOC) and the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL).

The peace process, initiated by India and Pakistan after the Kargil crisis, is historic for two reasons. First, the 26 November 2003 truce accord indicated that the new “mood” was now for building peace in the region. Second, firing on the borders stopped almost completely for the first time. The culmination of these developments was the agreement between the then Indian prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and Pakistan’s former president, Pervez Musharraf, to initiate a peace process on the sidelines of the Islamabad South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Summit meeting in January 2004. In a joint statement, they proclaimed a willingness to start a composite dialogue for the peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues, including Kashmir.

At an internal level, the government of India launched a major peace mission, in order to create an environment conducive to negotiations. It announced
the unilateral non-initiation of combat operations in J&K on 19 November 2000 – and this initiative was extended twice, up to 26 February 2001. The broadening of democratic activities by holding state assembly elections in 2002 and 2008, which were widely recognised as free and fair, was another crucial step towards conflict transformation.

India also expressed its readiness to initiate dialogue with every group in the state that abjured violence. The talks, since 2005 – initiated by the Indian prime minister with the moderate faction of the separatist group in the Kashmir valley, the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) – were an important achievement. Later, the government of India also held three round-table conferences (in February 2006 in New Delhi, in May 2006 in Srinagar, and in April 2007 in New Delhi) to listen to the diverse voices of J&K. It also established five working groups to look into various contentious issues confronting the region, including development. These engagements were an important step towards recognising that peace and development go hand in hand.

The easing of the visa process; exchanges through bus, train and air services between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, and Lahore and Delhi; and the opening of intra-Kashmir routes at Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakote facilitated ever-growing people-to-people interaction between India and Pakistan. Other developments, such as Islamabad’s open denouncement of the radical elements and exchange of prisoners at Wagah, paved the way for peace in the region. The steady decline in violent activities in the state in recent years reflects the work towards a peaceful atmosphere in the region.

Interactions with civil society activists from both sides of Kashmir indicate that the people of the region are fed up with violence and want to live in peace.
Justice Abdul Majeed Mallick – a former Chief Justice of the AJK High Court, who led a delegation from across the LOC to J&K in August 2005 – expressed optimism that the current wave of people-to-people interaction would help to resolve the Kashmir conflict, as it is the people of the region who can better steer the peace process than “vested interests”. People-to-people interactions such as the “heart-to-heart” talks in Jammu and New Delhi, in 2005 and 2007, provided occasions for leaders and activists from both sides of the LOC to speak their hearts on a single platform. The most successful outcome of the talks was that the participants agreed that violence cannot bring a solution to the Kashmir conflict.

The peace attempts within Kashmir, together with the external dimension of the peace process, have created a historic environment wherein hopes regarding the possibility of a resolution of the complex conflict remain high. This positive atmosphere has motivated the governments, as well as the local people, to take part in the economic reconstruction of the troubled region.

**Economic Reconstruction**

The peace process initiated in the 2000s created the required mood in the region to initiate measures for peace through economic reconstruction. The revival of the economy in Kashmir has gained ground with the realisation that peace attempts and development must go together in Kashmir. There is a noticeable shift in India’s policy – the earlier provision of providing central largesse to the state has been transformed into genuine development of the state by launching projects. In this context, the Bharat Nirman Programme (BNP) is significant. It was launched by the Indian government in 2005 to build rural infrastructure. Under this programme, INR 40 000 million is earmarked to be spent in 1 643 villages in the region. This change in approach is
fruitful in two ways. First, it helps to address economic grievances of the people by engaging them in development projects, thereby further contributing to the peace process. Second, it helps to reduce the chance of the conflict resurging, as poverty and unemployment are, among other factors, considered propellers of violence. Hence, it may prove not only costly but also imprudent to wait for the conflict to be settled fully before initiating a process of economic development.

Economic revival is an uphill task and is fraught with multiple challenges, ranging from renewing degenerating industries to tapping new resources and attracting private investment to develop infrastructure. These opportunities, especially in the context of economic development, are enormous – Kashmir is not only endowed with rich flora and fauna and scenic beauty, but also enjoyed a prosperous economy in the pre-independence era, partly due to its trade with neighbouring regions like China, Central Asia and West Asia via the famous Silk Route.

The revival of indigenous industries, the tapping of new areas with the help of the private sector, the opening of the intra-Kashmir routes, and infrastructural development would not only boost the Kashmir economy but would also generate employment. Citing unemployment and a lack of infrastructure as the main reasons for militancy, Ghulam Nabi Azad, then Chief Minister of Kashmir, repeatedly stressed the need to pay attention to these factors. He was confident that 80% of militancy would cease “if we are able to give employment to the youth”.11 In this context, a survey conducted by the British group Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) in March 2002 is worth mentioning. According to the survey12, 93% of Kashmiri respondents believed that the correct way to bring peace to the region would be through economic development,
which would provide more job opportunities and reduce poverty.

The region also needs the attention of national and international financial institutions, as well as aid agencies. International financial institutions, such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), can contribute significantly towards the development of the region. In November 2004, the World Bank pledged economic assistance for Kashmir to promote peace in the region, with the plea that “economic development along with peace is essential”. In 2004, the ADB earmarked US$ 300 million to Kashmir as a loan for a variety of projects. It also funded road-connectivity projects that suffered devastation during the past years of turmoil. In March 2007, the World Bank also cleared INR 4 000 million for the improvement of roads in the eight state districts, under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) guidelines. Under the scheme, as many as 100 new road projects were launched in the state during March 2007. Watershed development is another area where the World Bank has taken interest, and the power sector can also be boosted with the help of these institutions. Foreign aid agencies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and development banks, such as the Infrastructure Development Finance Company (IDFC), can also assist in the revival of the Kashmir economy.

Conclusion
Kashmir can become a zone of peace and development, with the participation of all parties involved in the conflict. This realisation itself is, no doubt, a grand achievement of the peace process. The Mumbai terror attack in November 2008 might have shaken the rate of peace in the region, but it was not strong enough to discourage the protagonists of peace or to encourage the antagonists of peace to return to violence. The ongoing peace process has created a space wherein conflict and development can be co-managed in the region without jeopardising the interests of the parties involved.

Kashmir is not only rich in natural resources, but it is also a repository of human resources. There have been many analyses about conflict and its negative dimensions. The current opportunity to bring peace by means of development to the region needs to be utilised, instead of waiting for the conflict to be resolved fully. The peaceful space provided by the recent thaw between India and Pakistan can be used to promote development. The conflict has brought innumerable losses for both India and Pakistan, but it is the people of Kashmir who suffer the most. The current opportunity must be used to better the living standards of the people of this troubled region. Economic development would likely steer the ongoing peace process further, and help realise a peaceful solution to the Kashmir conflict.

Dr Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra is with the Centre for Central Eurasian Studies at the University of Mumbai, in Mumbai, India. He has conducted extensive research on issues of human rights, conflict and peace in Kashmir, and has published extensively on these issues.

Endnotes
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid, p. 70.
5 This is one of the central arguments of the Democratic Peace theory, which holds that democracies are less likely to initiate wars among themselves than other forms of government.
6 The Kargil crisis refers to the border conflict that occurred between India and Pakistan in May-July 1999 in the Kargil Heights, later spreading to other areas of the LOC.
7 The entire partition line between India and Pakistan in and surrounding Kashmir is divided into three segments: 198 km of international border; the 778 km LOC – extending from Akhnoor to NJ 9842 till Siachen Glacier; and the undefined AGPL.
8 During the second round-table conference in Srinagar (24-25 May 2006), the Indian prime minister announced setting up five working groups (WGs) to further the dialogue process in the region. While the first WG focuses on confidence-building measures, the second focuses on strengthening relations across the LOC, the third WG deals with the economic development of the state, the fourth WG aims to provide good governance to people and the fifth WG aims to strengthen centre-state relations.
9 Interview by the author, Jammu, 6 August 2005.
10 The prime minister of India, Manmohan Singh, outlined the policy of peace through economic reconstruction for Kashmir in the conference on “Global Participation in India’s Economic Development” in New Delhi on 9 January 2007, in which he invited private sector industries to invest in the region.
12 The group conducted a poll of 850 people in J&K in 2002 in anticipation of the 2002 state assembly elections.
14 Since its inception in 2000, the PMGSY, aims to provide connectivity, by way of an all-weather road, to unconnected habitations in the rural areas. For details of the scheme and its guidelines, see <http://pmgsy.nic.in/pmg31.asp>.