

Was Partition of the Subcontinent the Best Solution to Hindu/Muslim Conflict?

Worksheet 2: No Peace in the Valley

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Kashmir, a region in the northern portion of India, has been a "special problem" since the partition of India. Most of the people of Kashmir are Muslims but the family that ruled Kashmir was Hindu. As a result, at the time of partition in 1947, the wishes of the ruling family dominated the thinking, resulting in a largely Muslim area under the control of a mainly Hindu nation.

One of the easiest ways to get shot in Srinagar, the largest city in the Vale of Kashmir, is to take a stroll at dusk down the main boulevard. Indian soldiers are on every street corner, growling, "No walking in the evenings." Like Beirut in the mid 1970's, or Sarajevo just a year ago - Srinagar is a beautiful city at the center of a place that is very edgy. Today there are five major insurgent groups and scores of smaller bands, all armed with rifles, machine guns and rocket launchers. They are continuing by guerilla and terrorist methods what is the longest unresolved international dispute of the second half of this century: Kashmir's political status.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars directly for control of Kashmir - in 1947-49, after the partition of British India, and again in 1965. Insurgent groups, some of which receive arms and training in Pakistan, operate in the valley. In the year that ended last August 31, there were 2,493 deaths resulting directly from the fighting and this may be a conservative number.

The Kashmiri insurgents are divided in many ways - whether freedom means a fully independent Kashmir or one united under the flag of Pakistan. Pakistani officials do not like the idea of an independent Kashmir. In 1947 nearly 80% of the 4 million subjects of the then princely state were Muslims: the region should have become part of Pakistan. Today about 65% of the 6 million people in the Indian state are Muslim. Pakistan believe that all of Kashmir is justly theirs.

For India, however, giving up even a part of Kashmir under its control today, either to those seeking independence or to those who want to join with Pakistan, is out of the question. There are the many Sikhs in the Punjab, to the south of Kashmir, who desire autonomy (independence): if Kashmir goes, Indian officials ask, what is to stop them? The loss of Kashmir could lead to separatist movements throughout India, they say. It could lead to a Soviet Union-style meltdown. It would be an admission that democracy, India-style, has failed in Kashmir and a blow to India's desire to be a secular state, a nation without a state religion, a nation for peoples of all religions - a fragile hope today, as the country is threatened not only by separatists but also Hindu fanatics like those who destroyed the historic mosque at Ayodhya in December and, in January, launched a wave of violence against Muslims in Bombay.

India is determined to crush the insurgents. Direct political negotiations with the various groups haven't been tried...there is no go-between. Most politicians have fled, fearing for their lives. The current governor admits "mistakes have been committed. A lot of blood has flowed. But we have a terrible problem...It's not a question of holding on to a territory. You can say it is a question of holding on to our way of life. The whole structure of our national politics, the whole basis of our nationhood is at stake."

Exercise:

1. Why do the Pakistanis believe Kashmir should be part of Pakistan?

2. What is India's greatest fear in the Kashmiri issue?

3. What solutions can you suggest for this problem?

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