

Bridging Divides

A Report on
Intra-Kashmir Women's Conference

SRINAGAR
November 16-18, 2007



Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR)

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Acknowledgements

This initiative was made possible by a grant from the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), New Delhi.

Support from the Women's Studies Centres of Jammu and Kashmir Universities

Photographs Curtsey of Aman Farooq, Tariq Masud, Poonam Dhawan, Sushobha Barve

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Bridging Divides: Intra-Kashmir Women's Conference

The first Intra-Kashmir Women's Conference—"Connecting Women Across the Line of Control"—was held in Srinagar from November 16-18, 2007. It was organised by the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR) in collaboration with the Women's Studies Centres of the Universities of Kashmir and Jammu.

The conference was historic in more ways than one. It was the first time that women from both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) were able to meet. It was held in Srinagar and the delegation from Azad Jammu Kashmir (AJK) travelled to India via the Wagah border. It took place in an atmosphere that allowed delegates to speak freely and frankly and express differences as well as areas of agreement. For many of the 12 women from Pakistan and AJK who travelled via Wagah and through Jammu to Srinagar, it was the first time they had visited areas in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) that lay on the other side of the border.

The delegation from AJK was diverse and included a human rights activist, an academic, a woman entrepreneur, a doctor, lawyers, a grassroots women's organiser, a former Director of Female Education and a television journalist. It excluded women who are involved in power politics or are the predictable participants of international meetings.

The delegates from J&K comprised writers, educationists, a former Chairperson of the J&K State Women's Commission, college principals, directors of Women's Studies Centres of Universities and Colleges, journalists, doctors, television anchors, advocates and women activists.

"Everyone is looking to belong, to hold on to some thread from the past, an association from our shared past that they'll all want to share—yet they are kept apart due to politics—local, national and international and the big system of security. Can we change that? Can we initiate a people's movement across the two nations, one that is based on mutual trust and respect?"

Dr Syeda Hameed
Member, Planning Commission, New Delhi

The process

The meeting was a culmination of several years of work by CDR in J&K. Initially, it focused on bringing women together for building trust and peace. Small groups of women on the Indian side of the LoC met and shared their personal stories of pain and suffering. As a result of this process, bonds were created between these women that did not exist before.

Out of these dialogues, the women began to talk about what needed to be done about the larger issues around the conflict in Kashmir. One of the early initiatives that they took was to create training material for peace education. For four years, training



programmes were held in J&K where hundreds of teachers participated and were taught the concepts of peace education.

In 2004, some of the women involved in this process suggested that something ought to be done to facilitate a meeting between them and their counterparts on the other side of the LoC. CDR applied for visas for a group of women from J&K to visit Pakistan and AJK. The visas never came through. The following year, a meeting was organised in Srinagar to which women from across the LoC were invited. However, the killer earthquake of October 2005 came in the way and the plan was temporarily put on hold.

In 2007, the idea was once again revived. But there were many uncertainties and obstacles to overcome. Although there was general support for the idea of women from both sides coming together and meeting, several people voiced their reservations about its feasibility, pointing to the uncertain situation in Pakistan.

CDR has always believed that it is in times of difficulty that we need more meetings and dialogues. It becomes imperative during such periods for civil society to keep the lines of communication open and keep the dialogue process uninterrupted. The conviction to hold the women's conference was so strong that CDR decided to go ahead despite many imponderables.

Finally, when the dates had been finalised, political developments in Pakistan almost derailed the

“We share the grief of the women rendered widows, we lament the loss of breadwinners for scores of families and we agonize over the fact that many injured will pass their lives as physically disabled. To all of them we say that for us Kashmiri women peace means more than the absence of war. For us bigotry, oppression and intolerance under cover of religion have no place. To remove the trust deficit, we need to embrace an ‘inner disarmament’ by reducing our own emotions of suspicion, hate and hostility. The power of non-violence is a tool. The 21st century needs an equitable and compassionate mindset. Women have a key role to play because in this era, the quality and capacity of the mind and not physical strength will define real leadership.”

Mrs Nighat Shafi Pandit
Chairperson, HELP Foundation, Srinagar

meeting. But the women decided that regardless of the political situation in India and Pakistan, they must make an attempt to meet, share experiences, and think about the role they could play in the peace process.

Between 2005 and 2007, CDR had organised seven Intra-Kashmir gatherings that ran parallel to the official peace process between the Governments of India and Pakistan. These meetings resulted in creating an informal network of individuals interested in the peace process on both sides of the LoC. The wide-ranging discussions in these conferences are helping to build a wider peace constituency on both sides. However, despite CDR's efforts, women's participation in these Intra-Kashmir gatherings has not been adequate. Their absence was noticed.

CDR was conscious that at this important juncture in history, women's voices and their perspectives are needed in official as well as civil society peace processes. On issues of peace and social change,

women in J&K have not been effectively mobilised. Although they have actively participated in protests against violence and human rights violations, they have been hesitant about participating in peace efforts.

The reason for this could be their experiences in the early 1990s at the height of the *azaadi* movement when they were in the forefront of processions and demonstrations. Those years were marked with repression, human rights violations, disappearances, death and destruction of property. Women suffered at the hands of both the State as well as non-State actors. Kashmiri society as a whole paid a heavy price. Hardly any family was left untouched by tragedy. People were angry at the State but also became

disillusioned with the leaders of the *azaadi* movement. Apart from general fatigue, these could be some of the reasons that made women hesitate about coming forward in large numbers to demand peace.

During the last 60 years, J&K has suffered Partition, has borne the brunt of wars between India and Pakistan, and has been living through armed conflict for the past 18 years. All these events have caused huge social turmoil and violence resulting in deaths, displacement of communities (in some cases several times), destruction of property, disruption of normal life and slow down of every kind of development.

In all this, women's suffering has been enormous and ongoing. Yet apart from some acknowledgement that women are the worst affected, there has not been adequate recognition of their suffering and the sacrifices they have made. There have been no serious attempts either by governments, separatists or mainstream political leaders to ask the women of the divided State what kind of future they visualised for themselves, for their families, for their society and how they would like the Kashmir dispute to be resolved.

Different organisations have held small and large women's gatherings in and outside of J&K. But no one had attempted to have an Intra-Kashmir women's gathering to tap the thinking of women about the peace process and resolution of the Kashmir issue.

“I am also demanding representation for women in all the major political parties including Hurriyat Conference. The credibility of the political parties should be determined on how much representation they give to women.”

Prof Taqdees Gillani
Associate Professor, AJK University, Muzaffarabad
and President, NGO-Hope



Although no one prevented their participation in the peace process, enough opportunities have not been provided to women in this regard. CDR wanted to provide such an opportunity to the women of the divided State of Jammu-Kashmir. It was this quest to bring women into the peace process that prompted the first All Women's Intra-Kashmir Conference in Srinagar during November 2007.

When the idea was broached with women in J&K, there was an enthusiastic response and support of the idea. Many offered their help. A small group in Srinagar worked along with the CDR team in planning the conference. Across the LoC and in Islamabad friends who had participated in CDR facilitated Intra-Kashmir Conferences earlier, agreed

conference. Dr. Yasmeen Ashai, head of Women's Studies Centre at the Government Women's College, Srinagar was part of the core-team that planned the conference and the Government Women's Polytechnic, Bemina and S.S.M. College of Engineering, provided manpower, technical help and other support.

As the preparations got underway, it became evident that this would not be an easy meeting to organise. The biggest hurdle was getting visas for the delegates from the Pakistan side of the LoC. Fortunately, several officials in different Ministries in India as well as the Indian High Commission in Islamabad came forward to help and all the visas came through barring one. The entire process once



Prof. Neerja Mattoo & Mrs. Azra Masud

to help in identifying women who could participate as well as making the travel arrangements. One of them is Mr. Tariq Masud, a retired civil servant. The delegation would not have been able to cross the Wagah border without his help.

Also assisting the process was Dr. Poonam Dhawan, Director of the Women's Study Centre, Jammu University, who agreed to associate with this initiative. Jammu University (JU) hosted the delegation twice during their transit through Jammu city. In Srinagar, the Women's Study Centre of Kashmir University also associated with the

“ ‘Connecting women across the LoC’ gives us a sense of optimism that the time has come when women’s voice can be heard to make Jammu Kashmir *Jannat Nazeer* (exemplary) again. You have experienced almost 60 years without the active participation of women. Give us at least five years. We will prove that issues can be solved with love and forgiveness, and the solution will be more reliable and sustainable.”

Dr Zahida Qasim
Pathologist and ultra-sonologist,
poetess, writer, Mirpur, AJK

again emphasised the need for governments to have more confidence in their citizens if they want to make the Confidence Building Measures (CBM) work.

One effective Kashmir CBM is the cross-border travel intended for divided families. The women's delegation from across the LoC brought with them the intensity of pain and suffering of divided families. The majority of them belonged to divided families. They were visiting this side for the first time. Some of the participants were keen to visit their relatives in different parts of the State whom their parents were



WHERE ARE OUR

MISSING

Parent

Parvina Ahengar
Founder, Association of Parents of Missing Persons (APDP)

unable to meet. Those who wanted to make such visits were given permits to extend their stay after the conference. To these women, the visit to their former homes and families became a pilgrimage that began the process of healing. This emphasises the importance of cross-border visits of people and the need to simplify the travel procedure to enable people to make them.

The three-day meeting

The meeting in Srinagar could not have been held at a more appropriate time. On both sides of the LoC, there was a visible desire to find a way out of the Kashmir problem. And women from both sides were ready to talk and explore avenues to build peace.

The delegation from AJK crossed into India through the Wagah border and travelled by road to Jammu on November 14. It was nearly 11 p.m. by the time they reached Jhelum Resorts in Jammu. When the women walked through the door into the hotel lobby, there were emotional scenes of reunion when some of the women met members of their divided families for the first time. Everyone present at the scene was deeply moved by this.

“Mental blocks and lopsided mindsets are the worst obstacles. The amount of hatred and prejudice preached in literature and textbooks on both sides is quite alarming. We should make a beginning by pinpointing such writings and getting them removed. Young minds are being poisoned with hatred and prejudice.”

Ms Qurrat-ul-Ain
Teacher, Srinagar



Next day the delegation flew to Srinagar where the J&K Tourism Department had especially organised a sightseeing tour of Srinagar for them soon after their arrival.

Dr. Syeda Hameed, member of the Planning Commission in India, formally inaugurated the conference on November 16. In her opening remarks she set the tone for the rest of the three days when she asked, "Why are there no women when it comes to discussions about the future of Jammu and Kashmir and India and Pakistan? Why is there no gender parity and gender balance in this area?" Dr. Hameed said that this first meeting of women from both sides of the border demonstrated that if people want to connect, governments ultimately give in.

Sharing the platform with Dr. Hameed were Dr. Naseema Jomezai, Chairperson, Dukhtar-e-Kashmir and women's rights activist from Islamabad and Mrs. Nighat Shafi Pandit, Chairperson of HELP Foundation, Srinagar. Dr. Jomezai said that crossing the border for the conference was like "a dream come true" for her and the other women. "It is ironic that Muslims and Hindus have so much in common in Kashmir and yet there is conflict", she said and suggested that it was time to focus on the similarities rather than the differences.

Mrs Nighat Shafi Pandit spoke of the impact of conflict on women and children. Misery and disaster have trans-territorial dimensions, she said, and these





Najama Shakoore
President, Women Welfare Organization, Rawalakot, AJK

"We must recognise that the media can play a central role in the promotion of peace. The media can emphasise the benefits that peace can bring, they can raise the legitimacy of groups or leaders working for peace, and they can help transform images of the enemy. However, the media can also serve as destructive agents in a peace process, and can choose to negatively report on the risks and dangers associated with compromise, raise the legitimacy of those opposed to concessions, and reinforce negative stereotypes of the enemy. These two roles are not mutually exclusive or inseparable."

Ms Sameena Khan
Presenter, political and current affairs shows on a television channel, Manchester, U.K.

acted as binding factors in terms of social response. "Experience has shown that when women from States of India forged unity on certain social issues, their combined action proved more fruitful and result-oriented than the sceptre of law wielded by the State agencies responsible for maintaining law and order."

The format of the conference provided for enough interaction between the groups even as some sessions heard formal presentations on different subjects by the delegates.

The conference addressed the following issues:

1. Overcoming difficulties, triumph of survival: Experiences of the conflict and earthquake,
2. How have lives of women been affected by calamities,
3. What role can women play in the peace-building process,
4. Reconciling differences across the divides,
5. Building trust and reconciliation.
6. Exploring avenues for cooperation across the LoC.





Sharing pain

One of the most significant sessions followed the inaugural session when the women sat around the table and individually shared their experiences of the conflict and the earthquake. A woman from AJK spoke of how her family had to flee from their home in Poonch district in India after the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. Since then, they had never returned. Her father tried hard to get a visa to see his ailing father, who had stayed behind in India. But he did not succeed. When he heard that his father died, he fell ill and never recovered. Within days, her mother also died. She was overwhelmed that she had finally got a chance to return and meet members of her divided family.

Another woman from AJK described the horror of losing many members of her immediate family in the 2005 earthquake. Yet another said that her grandmother had never reconciled to the loss of her



Dr. Zahida Qasim, Mirpur, AJK

husband and children when they crossed over during Partition and that she continued to think that she was living in a hostel rather than in her own home. She would address her son by her husband's name.

On hearing this, a Kashmiri Pandit woman recalled that she had come across identical cases in the camps in Jammu where displaced Kashmiri Pandits had sought shelter. The older people, in particular, were not reconciled to their new reality.

Parveena Ahangar of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) related movingly her personal search for her son who disappeared 14 years ago and how she set up the organisation when she found hundreds of others who had also disappeared.

Every story illustrated the suffering of divided families and the price that ordinary people have had to pay for the decades of conflict in the region.

This comment by a woman from Srinagar sums up the mood at this session:

"In 20 years, we have seen and experienced so much that our hearts have turned to stone. Our hopes have died. We thought our pain was so great that we would not find medicine. But when I heard the stories from the other side, I felt my pain was nothing. Our problems and issues are universal, the same. We have to see what we can do tomorrow."

The sessions also allowed women to share their views on how they could play a concrete part in the peace-making process and articulate suggestions about steps that governments on both sides should take.

"Let me say at this point that when we use the term 'Kashmiri' it includes all Kashmiris and not just Muslim Kashmiris. My first visit to Kashmir was in 1970. I was fascinated by the dresses and beauty of Kashmiri Pandits, Sikhs and Buddhists who add colour to the culture of this part of the subcontinent and are an integral part of it. I believe Kashmiri Pandits have made many contributions to literature, education, economics, language and culture. They are a part of 'Kashmiriyat.' It is ironic that Muslims and Hindus of this region have so much common yet we all had to live through this conflict. We speak the same language, have the same cultures and traditions and call the same place home. ✨ I believe it is time to focus on our similarities rather than our differences."

Dr Naseema Jomezai
Chairperson, Dukhtaran-e-Kashmir, Islamabad, Pakistan

View from the other side

At smaller group discussions, the women shared their perceptions of each other, what they had expected before they came to the meeting, what they had observed. For instance, the women from AJK said they were shocked to find that they could not call Pakistan from the Indian side of the LoC. They pointed out that they faced no such restrictions. They also commented on the visible presence of the security forces in civilian areas in Srinagar. Some of them noted that heritage structures in Srinagar were better preserved than such structures on their side. They also noted that the women on the Indian side were more political and far more vocal about their views than any of them. They acknowledged that in AJK women were not active participants in politics.

The women from Srinagar and Jammu found much in common when the two sides shared their suffering. At the same time, they felt that some of the information that the women from AJK had about their region and their experiences were exaggerated

and not entirely accurate. They also wanted to learn more about life on the other side of the border, whether the women were free to speak up and criticise the government and were not entirely happy about the focus of the discussion being on the suffering of the women in the Indian side of Kashmir.

The women from AJK said that their lives were generally peaceful. Both sides noted that the people who suffered the most were those who lived closest to the LoC and that they had gained the most after the exchange of fire between the two armies stopped. Women from both sides pleaded for open borders so that people could meet their families.

The strongest demand that emerged from all the sessions was that violence from all sides should end—from the State and from non-State actors. Both sides acknowledged that you could not hold only one agency responsible for the years of violence and strife.

The women also acknowledged that people on both sides, and especially women, had suffered the consequence of separation and conflict. And they came up with many concrete suggestions to bridge the divide that were articulated in the final consensus statement.

Another issue that was debated was what came first, justice or reconciliation. Was one possible without the other? In one of the groups, the examples

“Reconciliation means more than simply ‘sweeping past horrors under the carpet.’ For the oppressed, homeless and disturbed, it means coming to terms with the grave injustice in our lands and in our world; between the wealthy and the child banished to a life on the streets, and for the countless mothers whose sons have been martyred or listed among those disappeared, or perished under the rubble of their homes. For those that have suffered and are still suffering, reconciliation is no easy task. It is far more demanding, it pleads that people open their eyes and speak a language that is understood. It requires an acceptance and willingness to push forward for the betterment of all.”

Mrs Nayyar Malik
Teacher, Muzaffarabad, AJK



Ms Meeran Mahmud, Lahore, Pakistan



LOC meeting point at Mendhar-Tattapani

“The division of J&K State and its continuing tragic aftermath has fractured our reality into splinters. Be it five displacements of Kashmiri Muslims across the border or the painful exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley to Jammu, all are bits and pieces of our fractured reality. Honest acknowledgement of each other’s pain and suffering and sympathy with the people who suffered more than most in the valley is one way of reconciling differences across communal divides. And the first step toward this end should be an unqualified demand from other communities for demilitarisation of the Kashmir Valley, especially its civilian space.”

Prof Hameeda Nayeem
Professor, Kashmir University, Srinagar

from South Africa and Northern Ireland were examined against the background of Jammu and Kashmir. They concluded that justice was a prerequisite to reconciliation.

The issue of militancy was gingerly raised. There were mixed feelings evident. While some gave tacit support to the armed struggle, others drew attention to the feelings of blame towards AJK for having contributed to the huge loss of life and well-being in the valley. It was also pointed out that perhaps more needed to be done to coax militants out of militancy through offering adequate rehabilitation.

In one session the role of the media in a conflict situation was discussed. Journalists spoke of the constraints within which they worked, how they had no choice but to conform to the direction given to news coverage by their proprietors/owners and editors, of the tendency to reproduce verbatim the official version without giving due space to the other side and particularly to the views of ordinary people and of the absence of the human rights perspective in reporting conflict. At the same time, the delegates welcomed the positive response by the local media to the conference, the extensive and fairly accurate coverage given to the individuals present and to the issues raised during the conference.

Diverse views, common concerns

One of the objectives of the meeting was to understand each other through such sharing and deepen human bonds. The participants held diverse views on issues that affected them. As they expressed their views, at times there were sharp lines. But there was a spirit of accommodation towards differing viewpoints.

The smaller group discussions were particularly effective as they allowed women to freely and frankly voice their views and concerns. Some interesting insights and points emerged from these group discussions:

- The prerequisite for reconciliation is justice. If you keep the cancerous growth intact, it will be cosmetic change that is not long lasting. Peace must come from within each one of us. It cannot be imposed.
- Celebrate differences and recognise their right to exist.
- Only those who have personally suffered can decide to move on and forgive. This is not something that others can dictate or suggest. Forgiveness must come from all sides.
- There is no need for a blame game. Whether the violations are by insurgents or security forces, there must be acceptance of the reality without fear.
- Kashmiris living in the border area on both sides have suffered most in the last 60 years.
- Women from both sides recognise peace in the real sense would mean freedom from fear, feeling physically safe, freedom from violence, freedom to meet family members easily, freedom to pursue the field of choice, freedom of expression and freedom from patriarchal values.
- Borders should be softened so that cultural and other interactions can take place. Neutral zones between the two sides would mean allowing movement for reasons of health, employment and cultural interaction.
- Everyone felt the strong need for demilitarisation in order to reduce human rights violations that inevitably occur.



Chakan-da-Bang-Poonch Rawalakot Crossing Point

The three-day meeting ended with a consensus statement that brought together the concerns of the delegates. It was read out point by point to the entire gathering and all suggestions and changes incorporated before it was issued to the press.

On November 19, the AJK delegation flew to Jammu where the Vice Chancellor of Jammu University (JU), Dr. Amitabh Mattoo, received them. JU held a memorable evening at the university for the AJK delegation to meet citizens of Jammu, many of whom were Hindu, Sikh refugees of 1947 and their children, from Mirpur, Kotli, Poonch and Muzaffarabad. Later at the reception hosted by the Vice Chancellor of the university, the delegation presented to him a gift from the vice-chancellor of Muzaffarabad University.

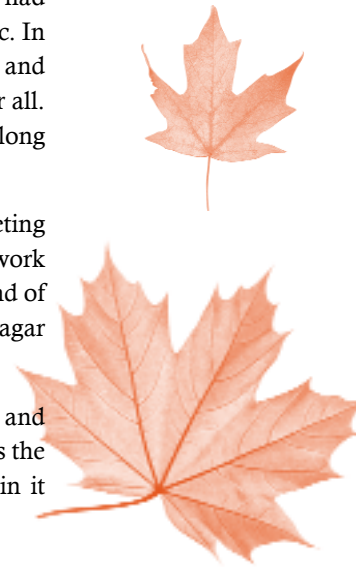


bitterness and listened to the pain of others. In the end the participants discarded the "victimhood" syndrome. Their refusal to stay confined to merely playing "mother" speaks of their determination to find a space for political action for themselves as important stakeholders and to ensure women's perspectives and concerns are included in the dialogue process and peace talks.

The consensus statement they arrived at on the last day of the conference and the process involved in getting to it, was democratic, transparent and free from arguments and wrangling. In the end the women showed more clarity about what they wanted, had courage to put it down on paper and make it public. In doing so they are also challenging their leaders and men folk. It was an important learning process for all. The women have taken the first step in the long journey ahead.

All the delegates would like another meeting before long, ideally in AJK. They want to work towards this end as they are convinced that the kind of exchange of views set in motion by the Srinagar meeting must be carried forward.

We hope the consensus statement will be read and that governments as well as political leaders across the spectrum take the suggestions and issues raised in it seriously.



Most of the AJK delegation left the next day via Amritsar, where they stopped to see the Golden Temple. A couple of the delegates, who had requested an extension of their visas to visit their families, were granted this by the Indian Government.

Some of the spirit of the conference and what it meant to the women from both sides is captured in the excerpts from assessments that the delegates sent on their return (see Annexure I).

Conclusion

The conference did address most of the objectives that we had set before us. The women participants came from varied backgrounds, regions and communities. They shared their pain without anger or

“There are many holy shrines in Rajouri and Poonch districts such as Shahdara Sharief, Chote Shah, Sain Miran Bakash Sain Ellahi Bakash, Gurdwara Nangali Sahib and Budda AmarNath Temple. Similarly there are holy shrines on the other side. People on both sides of the LoC should be allowed to get spiritual satisfaction.”

Ms Tabassum Mughal
Advocate, J&K High Court, Jammu Bench



Consensus Statement

The first Intra-Kashmir Women's Conference "Connecting Women Across the LoC" was held in Srinagar from November 16-18, 2007 organised by the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation in collaboration with the women's studies centres of the universities of Kashmir and Jammu. The participants adopted the following statement of consensus:

1. **We condemn** violence committed by all sides and in all forms and manifestations that has led to loss of lives and property, enforced disappearances, custodial killings, torture, unjustified arrests, rapes and molestations.
2. **We call for** withdrawal of military forces from civilian areas, reduction of forces on both sides of the Line of Control, disbanding of Special Operations Group and pro-government militants as well as de-commissioning of militant groups to create an atmosphere that is conducive to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.
3. **We support** the India-Pakistan peace process and hope that the resolution of the Kashmir issue is pursued and expedited. We believe people from Jammu & Kashmir, including women, should be an essential part of the peace process.
4. **We demand** that the Confidence Building Measures related to travel across the LoC are simplified to enable people of the divided State to visit each other, without any pre-conditions and without delay. Visas should be issued to all

irrespective of religious affiliations and political identities. Special facilities should be extended to senior citizens.

5. **We believe** that women's sacrifices and struggles during the years of conflict have not been acknowledged. The mental health consequences need to be recognised and urgently addressed.
6. **We urge** the facilitation of the return of youth who crossed the border and of displaced families.
7. **Families** of militants should not be discriminated against in accessing social welfare benefits.
8. **We urge** that all efforts should be made to facilitate the return and rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits.
9. **We recommend** that communication lines be opened up across the LoC, especially telecommunications.
10. **We ask** the governments on both sides to facilitate student and teachers' exchange programmes, research collaborations, media and cultural exchanges, extension of medical facilities and trade and tourism across the LoC.
11. **We urge** the media on both sides of the LoC to play a constructive role in the peace process by reporting developments in the region objectively.
12. **We demand** that all political groups and factions strive for a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue.



What They Said

Although the three-day meeting between women from both sides of the LoC had few formal speeches, some of the thoughts expressed by delegates from the two sides provide an insight into their perspectives and thinking on issues of peace and the steps that need to be taken. Given below are excerpts from some of the speeches made by the women who attended the conference.

Dr Syeda Hameed

Member, Planning Commission, New Delhi

I have just returned from Pakistan, having crossed the border on foot at Wagah. It has been a very difficult experience! The journey, even though minimal, has been arduous, for man-made boundaries have eroded us of what is most valuable to us -- family and family ties! For each and every person whose families reside in either of the two countries, hurdles have been their friends. They can't meet their relatives or visit friends and neighbours. People in both these countries are denied return or even visits to their birthplaces. They continue to be denied and robbed of their essence, their memories! *Memories are what define us. We are empty without memories.*

We are originally from Panipat. At the time of Partition, most of my family was forcibly put in a truck and sent across the border. I met my uncle this time after a long gap. He said his biggest regret was not to be able to go back to his *watan* – Panipat.

The mind refuses to believe we are different! So much affection, curiosity among people about each other can perhaps only be born out of a lifetime of togetherness.

Everyone is looking to belong, to hold on to some thread from the past, an association from our shared past that they'll all want to share—yet they are kept apart due to politics—local, national and international and the big system of security. Can we change that? Can we initiate a people's movement across the two nations, one that is based on mutual trust and respect?

I believe in people power. If people want to connect, governments have to eventually give in. In fact, gradually confidence-building measures have started the Samjhauta Express, the Amritsar-Nankana Sahib, the Srinagar-Muzzafarabad, the Poonch-Rawlkot buses and the Munabao-Khokhrapar rail link all providing the vital links between the two countries. Other bus routes like Jhangar-Mirpur, Mendhar-Kotti, Jammu-Sialkot, Skardu-Kargil are under consideration. But then these are not enough. Amritsar to Lahore is just an hour 15 minutes ride by car. Yet to make this journey, a person has to first go to Delhi, run to the embassy, get a visa, then go to the Ministry of Home Affairs to get a permit, and then through a series of checks, all of which takes a lot of time—and all this to link up with their family and loved ones!

We need to make travel easy. Maybe a visa on arrival can be tried. People of both these nations trust each other and governments have to learn to do the same. But what is needed for peace is also something more—it is concerted action by civil society, it is people to people connection.

There is, I believe, a peace activist in each one of us—the mother who teaches her child tolerance, the doctor who treats patients in remote villages, the

engineer who builds roads and bridges that connect people, the student who stands up against violence, the journalist who steers away from propaganda. We just need to recognize this activist. Everywhere women have taken the lead in this. Perhaps it is because women are the worst sufferers in a conflict and because they recognize the commonality of suffering despite borders.

The animosity that exists between the two countries is perceived—external pressures are always created and propaganda makes war, wherein truth is often twisted and facts distorted. The "other" is always blamed for everything that goes wrong and the media has a big role to play in all this. The media need to take up issues of commonalities.

All of us have an important role to play. This meeting is a big step forward because for the first time women from Kashmir on both sides have come together. We have to continue this process and show the way to be.

As Iqbal says ...

*Tundiye Baade Mukhalif se na Ghabra Ukaab,
Yeh to Chalti hain tujhe uncha udaane ke liye*

(Do not fear the adverse wind, oh Falcon,
It blows against you only to make you soar higher).

Mrs Nighat Shafi Pandit

Chairperson, HELP Foundation, Srinagar

The people of this State, especially the valley, have greatly suffered during the last two decades of turmoil. Referred to as the "Paradise on Earth", the valley had almost become a "Paradise Lost". Having got caught in a volley of fire from opposite sides, hardly any section of people remained unaffected by the wanton wave of damage and destruction causing loss of life and property. In the case of women there was, additionally, loss of dignity and honour. A large number of people were disabled or maimed. A very large number of people suffered severe mental health problems. Tens of thousands of sisters were widowed and even larger numbers of children were orphaned. Our socio-cultural fabric got torn to bits. The binding cord of *Kashmiriyat*, based on the percept and practices of the greatest saints, like Lalla Arifa and Sheikh Noor-ud-din Noorani (RA), came under severe strain.

Contrary to the impression created by a section of the media, that violence was directed against a

particular community, the fact of the matter is that damage took place across the board, affecting all communities. A major loss was in terms of the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in large numbers, which left a gaping void in the literary, cultural and administrative fields. The deficiency is still felt in these areas.

Although economic deprivation was widespread, during the same period a minuscule section of the population coming from a cross-section of society became rich overnight, not infrequently by following dubious means. But the common man continued to suffer.

While people in general and women in particular, on this side of the border, had to go through hell, we are not oblivious to the fact that our sisters on the other side, had also to tread on thorny paths, though the problems in their case mostly arose from different reasons, relating to the socio-economic structure and the nature of the polity on their side.

It took some time for civil society on our side to respond to the state of misery in the valley, but finally it did respond, in some measure. I can say with a sense of satisfaction that I, and some like-minded persons who supported me, were one of the very first to dare to come out in the open to nurse the wounds of helpless widows, orphaned children, the destitute and the disabled.

It goes to the credit of Kashmiri women that in the face of miserable conditions that they have had to go through physically, psychologically and economically, they have kept their homes intact.

Women have also become victims of rape and molestation from the people wielding the gun. It is ironic that while the powers-that-be and opinion-makers on either side have been waxing eloquent about women's empowerment, atrocities on women should take place with a sense of impunity.

There is also the issue of large numbers of girls who have now reached a nubile age but cannot get married because there is nobody to provide for the requirements on this account. The problem of void and irregular marriages has also cropped up in the aftermath of the armed conflict.

It is unfortunate that even social and economic issues affecting the lives of the people are being seen through the prism of political issues, involving a solution of the Kashmir problem. It is all the more unfortunate that the leaders on either side, be it

political or religious, are a divided lot. The division arises less from ideological reasons and more from clash of egos and personalities

I can say without fear of contradiction that misery and disaster have trans-territorial dimensions like poverty, squalor, social backwards or natural calamities and afflictions cut across boundaries and act as binding factors in terms of social response. Experience has shown that when women from some states of India, forged unity on certain social issues (like drinking and alcoholism on the part of their husbands), their combined action proved more fruitful and result-oriented than the sceptre of law wielded by the State agencies responsible for maintaining law and order. There is thus a strong case for women from both sides to unite on a common platform in order to combat the scourge of illiteracy, deprivation and disempowerment, resulting from lack of access to educational and economic opportunities, as well as physical and social harassment.

In conclusion, we share the grief of the women rendered widows, we lament the loss of breadwinners for scores of families and we agonize over the fact that many injured will pass their lives as physically disabled. To all of them we say that for us Kashmiri women peace means more than the absence of war. For us bigotry, oppression and intolerance under cover of religion have no place. To remove the trust deficit, we need to embrace an "inner disarmament" by reducing our own emotions of suspicion, hate and hostility. The power of non-violence is a tool. The 21st century needs an equitable and compassionate mindset. Women have a key role to play because in this era, the quality and capacity of the mind and not physical strength will define real leadership.

Dr Naseema Jomezai

Chairperson, Dukhtaran-e-Kashmir, Islamabad, Pakistan

I have attended various forums abroad in relation to Kashmir. Based on those forums and my own observations, I feel that women in general and Muslim women in particular have little perspective of the Kashmir dispute, the 17 years of armed struggle and the recent peace initiative which has started between Pakistan and India. This gap in perspective makes dialogue between women even more important.

A majority of women living in the subcontinent still live in a male-dominated society. Although we see women excelling in all fields of life, their

representation in high profile public roles is not proportionate to their population. That being said, women of the subcontinent do have a great influence on society. This influence is different than the influence Western women have on their societies because most eastern women are still homemakers, which gives them a lot of power at home. If all women play their role properly based on the tools given to them in society, they can surely be strong catalysts for positive change.

However, for this positive change to happen, all women have to act in unison to build a momentum. Events such as the one we are at help in building that momentum as they generate awareness and a sense of purpose. What we learn here, the ideas we exchange will ripple through our societies and hopefully bring about a strong desire for bettering our lives and the lives of people around us. We see and hear violence on our television set every day. This has desensitized us from feeling empathy for our fellow man. We need to realize that this conflict is creating hardship and pain for a lot of people for a long time now and it has to stop. Do we really want this conflict to be our legacy? Or do we want the solution of this conflict to be our legacy? I am sure that you all choose the latter.


Let me say at this point that when we use the term "Kashmiri" it includes all Kashmiris and not just Muslim Kashmiris. My first visit to Kashmir was in 1970. I was fascinated by the dresses and beauty of Kashmiri Pandits, Sikhs and Buddhists who add colour to the culture of this part of the subcontinent and are an integral part of it. I believe Kashmiri Pandits have made many contributions to literature, education, economics, language and culture. They are a part of "Kashmiriyat." It is ironic that Muslims and Hindus of this region have so much common yet we all had to live through this conflict. We speak the same language, have the same cultures and traditions and call the same place home. I believe it is time to focus on our similarities rather than our differences.

Ms Qurrat-ul-Ain

Teacher, Srinagar

Mental blocks and lopsided mindsets are the worst obstacles. The amount of hatred and prejudice preached in literature and textbooks on both sides is quite alarming. We should make a beginning by pinpointing such writings and getting them removed. Young minds are being poisoned with hatred and prejudice.





In the face of conflict and its consequences, I have both sides of Kashmir in my mind. Injustice, violence and abuse of women are not the monopoly of this or that side. If we have come together at a historical moment like this, I am sure we are conscious of the historical context in which we are meeting and talking to each other. We can start right now by encouraging our youngsters to study in each other's areas. There can be no better medium for a permanent understanding, raising a crop of like-minded stakeholders—men and women—who share a common vision of peace and security

We should also demand more effective participation of women in the consultative and decision-making process. Due weightage should be given to issues directly touching the lives and honour of women. The confidence building measures are shockingly silent on how to mitigate the pain and agony of women.

I would once again say that history has for the first time offered a rare opportunity for us to play a role. To play that role we have to see that the barriers just breached are not sought to be raised again.

Mrs Nayyar Malik

Teacher, Muzaffarabad, AJK

The centrality of women in creating a culture of peace in times of conflict and their role in development cannot be denied. It is therefore imperative to ensure women's advancement, enabling them equality with men, a condition for social justice and essential to building a viable, just and developed society. Without the full participation of women, enjoying equal rights with men, there can be no real peace, no real development, no real reconciliation.

Reconciliation means more than simply "sweeping past horrors under the carpet." For the oppressed, homeless and disturbed, it means coming to terms with the grave injustice in our lands and in our world; between the wealthy and the child banished to a life on the streets, and for the countless mothers whose sons have been martyred or listed among those disappeared, or perished under the rubble of their homes. For those that have suffered and are still suffering, reconciliation is no easy task. It is far more demanding, it pleads that people open their eyes and speak a language that is understood. It requires an acceptance and willingness to push forward for the betterment of all.

The 'women's peace bus' efforts need to be extended to women living across the LoC to mitigate the suffering of divided families and enable women to meet and express concerns, frustrations, experiences and strategies.

There is need for greater cross border women to women interaction. In this context, it would be useful to facilitate meetings of special interest groups, in particular those who can influence it like Kashmiri women from Gilgit-Baltistan and Ladakh-Kargil, not only to enable family reunion but also dialogue between women of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Meetings between these women can assist in the process of reconciliation as well as lead to bridging the divide and creating a lobby for dialogue and peace.

Prof Hameeda Nayeem

Professor, Kashmir University, Srinagar

Let me first of all clarify that there are not only geographical divides but there are dividing lines on the landscape of the mind, of emotions, and the landscape of the spirit. But the deepest divide is the political divide between India and Kashmir. Let me also clarify that the prerequisite of any reconciliation is justice and unless the genuine demands based on the universal principles of justice and democracy are acceded to and the fundamental and universal rights of the Kashmiri people are restored, no reconciliation worth the name is possible.

For this purpose, Indian nation has to take every step to remove the divide by transcending hyper-nationalism, which, in effect, gives the State absolute totalitarian control over the people who are made subservient to the overriding State authority. People are unwillingly made to serve the interests of the rulers and made a willing party or tool in the oppression and repression of people, their rights and their voice. It is this hyper-nationalism that is whipped up by agencies, rulers, by the political class time and again to actually serve their own interests of perpetuating their power over the nation. It is this stranglehold of the nexus of different State forces that Indian people have to break to be able to connect to Kashmiris. This they can do by reconceptualising their nationhood, their nationalism in a way that gives precedence to people's rights over the State. Because what does a nation mean if people are denied their rights? A nation is made of people who willingly come together to form a country.



Prof. Taqdees Gillani, Muzaffarabad & Dr. Yasmeen Ashai, Srinagar

There are regional divides within the State of Jammu and Kashmir. So far as ethnic, religious and linguistic divides are concerned, those should be acknowledged, respected and celebrated because different cultures, languages and modes of living only add variety and colour to our life and make it a mini world in itself.

Divides on the landscape of spirit could be removed through interfaith dialogues. Religious pluralism as seen in the committed religious figures rather than in the writings of secularists alone can be authentic from the insider's perspective and an answer to fundamentalisms of various religions and exclusivist exoteric theological dogmatism.

The division of J&K State and its continuing tragic aftermath has fractured our reality into splinters. Be it five displacements of Kashmiri Muslims across the border or the painful exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley to Jammu, all are bits and pieces of our fractured reality. Honest acknowledgement of each other's pain and suffering and sympathy with the people who suffered more than most in the valley is one way of reconciling differences

across communal divides. And the first step toward this end should be an unqualified demand from other communities for demilitarisation of the Kashmir Valley, especially its civilian space.

Prof Taqdees Gillani

Associate Professor, AJK University, Muzaffarabad and President, NGO-Hope

Instead of focusing on more confidence building measures, it is important to strengthen the existing ones. The bus service should go directly from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad and vice versa. The possible avenues of cooperation can be trade and exchange of delegations (students, lawyers, traders, intellectuals and politicians). Visas should be given for the desired period without area and city restrictions.

People of LoC have suffered on both sides. Both governments should start social development and rehabilitation at the Line of Control.

In order to give a natural complexion to Kashmir, Kashmiri Pandits should come back to Kashmir. If I want pre-1956 situation for ourselves, I want the pre-1989 situation for the Pandits also.



In Azad Kashmir, we have nearly 30,000 migrants living in different camps. They do not fall under any definition for internally displaced people, nor are they entitled to any international or U.N funding or aid. Refugees who migrated in the 1990s are not allowed to go back to their native towns. They should be allowed to visit their families back home.

Unconditional pardon should be extended to ex-militants. Some initiatives should be taken to help them make a new start in life. Their families should not be discriminated.

I am also demanding representation for women in all the major political parties including Hurriyat Conference. The credibility of the political parties should be determined on how much representation they give to women.

Ms Tabassum Mughal

Advocate, J&K High Court, Jammu Bench

Large-scale migration from the twin-district of Poonch & Rajouri took place during the disturbances of 1947. These continued during subsequent wars of 1965 and 1971. As a result of atrocities of wars, about 50 percent of the population of Poonch and Rajouri migrated across the LoC. As a result, a large number of families were divided on either side. The whereabouts of departed members of divided families were not known to them for 56 long years upto 2004. Several families migrated and the people they left behind died either in daily cross-border shelling or due to natural causes. They were buried with their hidden desires of meeting their departed kin beyond the LoC.

Here are a few suggestions to strengthen the confidence building measures:

- Border roads between exit points and bus stations should be properly maintained.
- Senior citizens, the old and infirm, should be allowed to cross without formal travel documents to see their relatives and friends on either side of the LoC. Their identity cards should be enough.
- Time taken to grant permission to travel beyond the LoC, that currently takes from six months to one year, should be reduced to one month.
- In the event of serious illness or death of a relative on either side of the LoC, permission should be given within a week and for marriages and special occasions, within a fortnight.
- There are many holy shrines in Rajouri and Poonch districts such as Shahdara Sharief, Chote



Shah, Sain Miran Bakash Sain Ellahi Bakash, Gurdwara Nangali Sahib and Buddha AmarNath Temple. Similarly there are holy shrines on the other side. People on both sides of the LoC should be allowed to get spiritual satisfaction.

- Both governments should promote health visas as a priority. Patients suffering from serious ailments should be allowed to visit J&K for specific treatment.

Dr Zahida Qasim

Pathologist and ultra-sonologist, poet, writer, Mirpur, AJK

We people of Jammu Kashmir are like one family who have undivided bonds of blood, affection, social values, cultural, regional and political attachments to each other. Keeping us away from each other by implementation of force never solved the issue. Rather it enhanced the sufferings, agony, misery and insurgency in the State.

“Connecting women across the LoC” gives us a sense of optimism that the time has come when women's voice can be heard to make Jammu Kashmir *Jannat Nazeer* (exemplary) again. You have experienced almost 60 years without the active participation of women. Give us at least five years. We will prove that issues can be solved with love and forgiveness, and the solution will be more reliable and sustainable.

Even after 60 years, our children perceive and react to the situation. This is evident in this poem written by my daughter who is just 14 years old.

*Of the Kashmir vale
Let me tell you a tale*

*Of the dancing butterflies
Of mountains touching the skies*

Of the Angels so beautiful
Of the people so peaceful
Of the greenery's charm
Of the lush green farms
Of the splashing streams
Of the valley of dreams
Then the dreams of people
Were pricked with a needle
The pain of sorrows
The urge of love
The vanishing hope
The broken rope
No place to hide
From the killing tide
Of bloodshed and tears they speak
For mercy the angels seek.

Annah Shaukat (21.9.2007)

Ms Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal

Executive Editor, 'Kashmir Times', Jammu

There are several regional, ethnic or communal prejudices that various communities come up with when we speak of cooperation in Kashmir. The first step, therefore, begins not just at dispelling these prejudices but also understanding that these prejudices have been injected by vested interests, whether they are State or non-State actors, perpetrating certain myths. It is important to understand who is perpetrating these and why.

Secondly, the foundations of this cooperation cannot be built simply on social-cultural exchanges though they form an important part of the process of bonding and building bridges, because of shared heritage of language, culture and love for music and arts. The Jammu and Kashmir problem is basically political in nature. The divisions created and the prejudices thereof, are an offshoot of the political problem. By negating the political issues, we would be creating only a façade of cooperation, not building a firm foundation.

So, what do we really talk about apart from cultural and academic exchanges? Do we talk of common problems? Illiteracy, standard of education, health-care facilities and lack of development can form part of the dialogue when we begin talking. These are problems that are common to both sides of the Line of Control. So is the problem of the people living in the border areas, bearing the brunt of six

decades of hostility with huge presence of troops on both sides, firing, shelling and presence of minefields in their neighbourhoods. Along with denial of development, comes the denial of basic civil rights because the lives of the people on the border are constantly under surveillance.

One can also not turn away from the ground reality of the human rights scenario and the violation of human rights, in whatever degree, on either side. I cannot speak of what is going on across the Line of Control. But here on this side, we have an endless list of killings, draconian laws, disproportionate presence of troops, custodial killings, disappearances, rapes and human rights violations perpetrated by both security forces (along with the pro-government gunmen and the notorious Special Task Force) as well as the militants. Besides, there are also cases of people being partially or totally displaced due to the armed conflict.

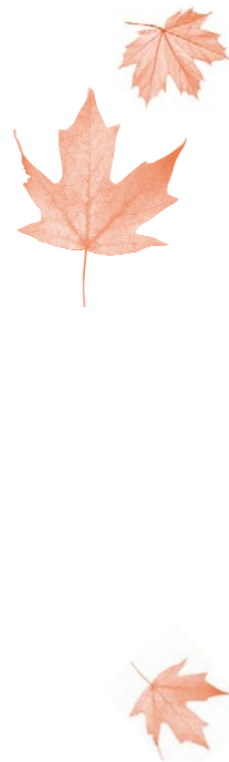
So when we talk and meet each other, it is important to listen to each other, understand the level of suffering and express our solidarity to each other. Lessons can be drawn from other South Asian conflicts and worldwide where women have been successful in overcoming the traditional prejudices and coming forward to build solidarities and play a crucial role in peace building, which is crucial to the interests of the women and which affects not only the victims but every woman in her day to day life.

Ms Sameena Khan

Presenter, political and current affairs shows on a television channel, Manchester, U.K.

We must never have pre-ordained solutions from the outside that make the situation fit the solution. This is especially relevant to those in the media. The media, in the framing and reporting of conflict, must be acutely sensitive to the issues and inter-linkages that inform and shape the dynamics of that conflict.

At the outset, we must recognise that the media can play a central role in the promotion of peace. The media can emphasise the benefits that peace can bring, they can raise the legitimacy of groups or leaders working for peace, and they can help transform images of the enemy. However, the media can also serve as destructive agents in a peace process, and can choose to negatively report on the risks and dangers associated with compromise, raise the legitimacy of those opposed to concessions, and reinforce negative stereotypes of the enemy. These two roles are not mutually exclusive or inseparable.





What It Meant To Them

The participants in the three-day conference between women from both sides of the LoC were asked to send in their evaluation of what they thought about the meeting. The following are excerpts from the notes sent by some of the delegates.

Prof Neerja Mattoo

Writer, former Principal, Government Women's College, Srinagar

The first-ever conference of women from both sides of the Line of Control held in Srinagar, Kashmir served to expose the hollowness of many imagined 'truths'.

The first was our belief that it would not happen: with the state of uncertainty, confrontational politics and the imposition of Emergency in Pakistan, facilitating the participation of a group of women in a round-table in this part of Kashmir would be the last priority for their government. But the fact that they were allowed to come—both the Governments played a positive role in this—proved the 'Doubting Thomas's' wrong!

Another myth exploded was the belief that the two sides would be so trapped in a legacy of suspicion and bitter memories that the round-table would become, at best, a polite, superficial social interaction or at worst, a battlefield of rancour and mistrust and hence serve no purpose but to perpetuate the myth. Here again the women showed how underestimated are their skills at breaking barriers, reaching out to and understanding each other's pain and finding a commonality of concerns.

While relating their individual experiences in the session I had the privilege to chair, the rapt,

sympathetic attention with which they listened to narratives of suffering, of surviving violence and disasters—man-made or natural—, the pain of families torn apart by borders, pulled out of their roots, dislocated—whether in Pak-administered Kashmir or in the camps in Jammu—, had an empathetic as well as therapeutic effect. The fact that they became a vibrant 'Sisterhood' and wanted to heal each other, made one hopeful for a better future. After all, if there was so much common to them all, why could they not dream of a tomorrow free from the violence and mistrust that plagued us all, particularly the women? They did exactly that. At the end of the day, warm currents of friendship flowed freely, the affection and enthusiasm was almost tangible!

The third misconception destroyed was the fear that nothing concrete in the form of a joint 'vision for the future' document would emerge at the end of it. How could the two groups of women from opposite sides of the conflict, with their own separate sets of heroes and villains, agree on a single issue, the cynics had asked. But here too they were rebuffed. Not only does the document issued at the end of the three-day conference denounce *all* forms of violence, but it also demands a decisive role for women in all negotiations in future. Their refusal to stay confined to merely playing 'mother' speaks of their determination to find a space for political action for themselves.

Mrs Azra Masud

Islamabad

The Srinagar Women's Conference was indeed a landmark in narrowing the gulf that has existed for



more than half a century between women of Jammu and Kashmir, living on the two sides of the divide. Men, mostly politicians, diplomats and intellectuals, got the occasional chance to meet with each other. But barring a couple of occasions, they met mostly on the soil of third countries or at best in Islamabad and Delhi. Further, they always met with fixed agendas and with rigid briefs.

Women, who form more than half of the population of the territory, have hitherto been excluded, intentionally or by negligence, to have any say in the shaping up of the future of their homeland and in what type of government or civil society, value system or environment they would like to live in and raise their children in. The Srinagar Conference, for the first time, provided an opportunity to the women of Jammu and Kashmir, living on both sides of the divide to meet with each other and to develop a better understanding of each other's beliefs, perceptions, aspirations, compulsions and concerns. To the visiting women from AJK, the conference also provided an invaluable opportunity to see the area across and to feel and smell its flavour.

Though CDR had drawn a specific schedule of activities, of sessions and group discussions, of topics and sub-topics, I believed from the beginning that the format of the conference cannot and should not be too rigidly followed, the conference cannot be too academic or politically centered. The basic purpose of this first ever women's meet should be to first minimize if not eliminate, reservations, prejudices and suspicions and to create the foundations of credibility, better understanding and goodwill.

It was heartening to note that the conference generated immense goodwill, much more than what I had expected. The introductory session on the first day resulted in rediscovering many lost relationships and family connections besides striking new friendships. It was like a family reunion.

Dr Poonam Dhawan

Director, Women's Studies Centre, Jammu University

For me at a personal level, it was a rare opportunity to get a glimpse of the entire complexity of the conflict situation and how it has impacted deeply our mindsets. Some group members could look at their personal sufferings more objectively and with empathy. A group member's son had gone missing, another member's son had died during Kargil

Operation, another member's husband had gone through a difficult situation, some members had faced threats, and some had witnessed human rights violations. But the whole process of sharing the suffering with each other was not only at an emotional level but also at a logical level. The experience sharing was of an intense exploratory nature. It provided the required connectivity. Heart to heart talk made each one feel that suffering across the LoC is common and needs to be looked at afresh and minimised.

The delegates held the view that essentialising Motherhood often reduces women's choices to only the home. Whereas women do have responsibility towards home and family, they should not be mute spectators and can take an active part in negotiating peace at the political, social, economic and cultural level. Some neutral issues and spaces can be agreed upon and joint action can be taken by women to strengthen partnership and better understanding of each other's realities. Women can form opinion groups, pressure groups and act as Peace Educators. In areas like health, education and culture especially, programmes for teacher's training, student exchange and exchange of women working at the grassroots level can be planned. Collaborative researches though pilot projects may be taken up. Common centres on the LoC to facilitate meetings may be created. Such co-operation would help in dispelling disinformation. Some of the women may want to play an active and leadership role at the political level too. Institutions and mechanisms for redressing grievances can be strengthened to the advantage of everyone. By enhancing the role of women as peace builders, negotiators and agents for non-violent social change, new hope and optimism can be built up.



Mrs. Nayyar Malik



Ms Gurmeet Kour, Srinagar & Ms Kalpana Sharma, Mumbai

Prof Yasmeen Ashai

Head, Post-graduate Department and Coordinator, Women's Studies Centre, Government Women's College, Srinagar

Before the commencement of the conference, there was an apprehension about the significance of the event and also whether women from both sides of the LoC would be able to make a meaningful contribution or not.

I was personally worried about the amount of seriousness participants would show and the recommendations that would form part of the conference. There was also an undercurrent of a love-hate relationship that would prevail among the participants.

A set of very useful and meaningful recommendations was the outcome of the conference that needs proper documentation and wide dissemination.

Since this was for the first time that a women's conference on the sensitive issue was held, it is important that a series of such conferences should be held.

Ms Meeran Mahmud

Lawyer, Lahore

My participation at the "Connecting Women Across the LoC" conference was an experience that is difficult to articulate. It was a trip that helped me grow emotionally and intellectually. Women had come together from both sides of the border, women of different beliefs, ages and vocations, to discuss an issue that has been sensitive for 60 years. But while in the past, this issue was debated by men who perpetuated war and violence, here was a forum

where we as women were able to create a sisterhood that went beyond all boundaries and brought us together on an issue close to our hearts.

I learnt that the suffering created over the last 60 years was so pervasive that it has made victims of us all. Families have been divided, people have died, and children and parents have suffered. Women being over half the population have suffered a great deal. This conference gave us a podium to demand an end to these problems and moot constructive solutions.

We all found Srinagar extremely beautiful. Everywhere we went gorgeous mountains were in the background. There was a lot of mist so the mountains often seemed blue and other-worldly. We visited a number of tourist attractions in Srinagar and were impressed by the beauty and effort put into maintaining Srinagar's heritage. When we left Nishat Gardens, a convoy of about 20 military trucks passed by us on the road, making the air turn a few degrees chillier. There is after all trouble in Paradise. And that is what we wanted to come help resolve

On November 19, 2007, we flew from Srinagar to Jammu. In the evening our Azad Kashmiri delegation had an interactive meeting with members of the public and the press in Jammu University. There were many senior citizens present. Many of these old Hindus and Sikhs were born in Mirpur, Muzaffarabad or Poonch before Partition. It was an extremely moving experience where we all shared stories of being torn from our roots and missing our homeland. Seventy to ninety-year-old men and women cried and made us cry at stories about being denied the chance to see their ancestral homes and if they were allowed to go back, how many of them had homes that are now under the Mangla Dam. These old people begged us not to give up on our quest for peace and harmony. They have suffered the crippling effects of the past 60 years and do not want it to continue.

One message that came out loud and clear was that members of the public in both countries want peace. This came out through the experiences of everyone visiting the neighbouring country (even when non-Muslims visited Pakistan), that the people there were warm and hospitable and did not harbour the hatred their governments alleged they had. This hostility has been engineered by the governments and militaries to promote their own interests while millions have suffered. We all vowed to no longer take this quietly and to demand peace.





Editorial

THE KASHMIR TIMES

Tuesday, November 20, 2007

Women as peace makers

Intra-Kashmir dialogue demonstrates women's capacity to build bridges, shun violence

THE three-day seminar of women delegates from both the parts of our erstwhile state from both the sides of the LoC concluded on Sunday on an optimistic note. The seminar was titled "Connecting Women from Across the LoC" and had been sponsored by the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation and the Womens Study Centres of the universities of Kashmir and Jammu. All three of them must be congratulated for taking this initiative, in a new direction for the same end. It was the first ever intra-Kashmir women dialogue attended by over thirty women delegates including fourteen from across the Line of Control. Though the gains from this first ever interaction of its kind may have been rather minimal, its significance cannot be underestimated. This is not only for the fact that it was for the first time that women from the two sides were engaged in a three-day interactive session but also because of the common concern on both sides of the dividing line for silencing the guns and pushing forward the peace process. All the fourteen delegates from Pak Administered Kashmir were effusive with emotion at being able to visit their ancestral home, which their parents had been forced to quit for ever even before they had born. For many of them the visit is almost like a pilgrimage, which their dead or old parents could not perform. They narrated how their old parents and elders spoke about the Kashmir they had left behind and their dream of seeing the once beautiful valley beaming in joy

and colours as before. Almost unanimously they conveyed to their sisters on this side of the LoC their irresistible urge to, if not to be united with them, but to be easily available to them as friends, without facing the hassles of permits, police verifications and physical violence.

These women represent eloquently the urge of the average resident of the PAK to be on friendly terms with their counterparts across the LoC. But more importantly, the range of issues discussed during these three days culminating in a rather bold and imaginative consensus statement is what endures the significance of the event. The manner in which women from both sides of the Line of Control strongly opposed the gun, calling for withdrawal of troops, disbanding of SOG and renegades as well as decommissioning of all militant groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir is what made the event a success as far as the peace process is concerned. All the delegates present there reiterated their demand that women should be enabled to play a more meaningful role not only in the governance and development of their region but also in the important task of conflict resolution and finding a peaceful solution of the Kashmir problem. Affirming their faith in the peace process initiated by India and Pakistan and calling for inclusion of people including women, who have been the worst sufferers during the turmoil, the delegates have not only demonstrated that women have a stake in peace building but also in policy mat-

ters while arguing how it affects their day to day life. The women have also called for introduction of more confidence building measures including hassle free travel across the border and introduction of cultural exchanges, trade and student exchange programme which indeed can go a long way in bringing the two sides closer. The significance of this initiative cannot be measured in black and white, in terms of effective measures taken. Their purpose is both to influence and to indicate. Influence is some thing not to be seen but to be felt over time and it is hoped that women of both the parts of the divided state will continue meeting and pressing for their demands, both as women and as citizens of the divided state. The ability to come up with such a consensus statement in such a short period of time demonstrates the capacity of the women in this state to not just build solidarities, based on gender injustice and victimization, but also become effective agents of peace and policy makers. A major positive signal emerging from the conference is that while women expressed concern about victimization of women in the conflict, there was no attempt to glamourise either the victimization or the violence but a desire to transcend grief and move forward.

The ability of the women from various regions of Jammu and Kashmir on this side and Pakistan administered Kashmir to evolve an understanding of each other's issues is no mean achievement on its own. The

experiences from conflicts world wide including women from Nagaland, Sri Lanka and Palestine-Israel, where women involved in building bridges have indeed played an effective role further lend credence to the belief that women can play a crucial and constructive role in Kashmir, whether it is in the capacity of human rights activists or policy makers. The vehement opposition to violence of all kinds, injustices perpetrated on the people and concern about the effects of continuum of violence have rightly been the pivotal issues of discussion during the three days. It is hoped that the rulers of both the countries and the popular leaders of Jammu and Kashmir will listen to what these women, whose voice is that of the common folk and listened to, have said and want. But more importantly, this initiative should not be misconstrued as the only needed CBM towards peace making to eclipse the significance of the much larger issues and concerns raised during the conference. The initiative should not be allowed to become a tool in the hands of either of the governments to project that such visits and cross-border interactions alone are indicators of normalcy. Normalcy certainly means much more to an individual Kashmiri on either side of the dividing line. The significance of such initiatives, therefore, can neither be over-estimated nor under estimated. It is a step towards peace and providing women a role in peace building indeed, albeit a very small one.





Conference Participants

1. **Dr. Syeda Hameed**, Member, Planning Commission of India, New Delhi
2. **Prof. Neerja Mattoo**, Writer, former Principal, Govt. Women's College, Srinagar
3. **Dr. Girija Dhar**, Former Chairperson, State Women's Commission, Srinagar
4. **Dr. Suraiya Ali**, Educationist, Srinagar
5. **Dr. Vimla Dhar**, Medical Doctor, Srinagar
6. **Dr. Shamshad Bashir**, Principal, Baramullah Government Degree College
7. **Mrs. Nighat Shafi Pandit**, Chairperson, HELP Foundation, Srinagar
8. **Mrs. Fahmida Shah**, Principal, Government Women's Polytechnic, Srinagar
9. **Ms Quarrat-UI-Ain**, Writer, teacher, Srinagar
10. **Mrs. Dilafroze Kazi**, Director, SSM College of Engineering, Baramullah
11. **Mrs. Naseem Shifae**, Leading Kashmiri Poetess, Srinagar
12. **Ms Niloofer Khan**, Coordinator, Women's Studies Centre, Kashmir University
13. **Dr. Yasmeen Ashai**, Head of Post-graduate Department and Coordinator, Women's Studies Centre, Government Women's College, Srinagar
14. **Prof. Hameeda Naeem**, Pro-freedom activist and Professor, Kashmir University
15. **Mrs. Parvina Ahengar**, Founder, Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons
16. **Mrs. Hafeeza Muzaffar**, Secretary, State Women's Commission
17. **Ms Gurmeet Kaur**, Teacher, singer and radio artiste, Srinagar
18. **Ms Syeda Afshan**, Teacher, Department of Mass Communication, Kashmir University
19. **Ms Muslim Jan**, Editor, Department of Mass Communication, Kashmir University
20. **Prof. Tadzin Jolden**, College Principal, Leh, Ladakh
21. **Ms Zehra**, Kargil, Teacher, Govt. Women's Polytechnic, Ladakh
22. **Dr. Poonam Dhawan**, Director, Women's Studies Centre, Jammu University
23. **Mrs. Anuradha Bhasin**, Executive Editor, Kashmir Times, Jammu
24. **Mrs. Rita Jitender**, Social activist, Jammu
25. **Ms Indu Kilam Raina**, College teacher, Kashmiri Pandit migrant
26. **Ms Tabssum Mugal**, Advocate, J&K High Court, Poonch/Jammu
27. **Ms Ellora Puri**, Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Jammu University
28. **Dr. Abha Chauhan**, Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Jammu



30. **Ms Kalpana Sharma**, Independent Journalist, writer, columnist, Mumbai
31. **Ms Shobna Sonpar**, Clinical psychologist, New Delhi
32. **Ms Sahba Hussain**, Social and human rights activist, Aman Trust, New Delhi
33. **Ms Sushobha Barve**, Executive Secretary, Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation
34. **Mrs. Taqdees Gilani**, Associate Professor, English Department, AJK University, Chairperson, NGO 'Hope', Muzaffarabad.
34. **Dr. Naseema Jomezai**, Chairperson, Dukhtaran-e-Kashmir, Women's Rights Activist, Islamabad.
36. **Mrs. Nabila Ayoub**, Advocate, AJK High Court, Mirpur
37. **Ms Meeran Mahmood**, Lawyer, Lahore
38. **Mrs. Syeda Najma Shakoor**, President, Women Welfare Association, Rawalakot
39. **Mrs. Tanveer Latif**, Former Director, Female Education AJK, Project Manager, USAID Educational Project, Bagh.
40. **Mrs. Nayyar Malik**, School teacher, housewife, Muzaffarabad
41. **Dr. Zahida Qasim Malik**, Medical Doctor, poetess, Mirpur
42. **Ms Samina Mateen Khan**, Originally from Muzaffarabad, AJK, currently television journalist, Manchester, UK
43. **Mrs. Azra Masud**, Housewife, Islamabad
44. **Mrs. Rehana Haroon**, Associate Professor, F.G. Post Graduate College, Rawalpindi
45. **Mrs. Shaheen Ashai**, Associate Professor Political Science, Government Degree College, Mirpur
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The Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation is registered as a not-for-profit Section 25 company in Mumbai, India. Its founding members are professionals with experience in various disciplines including senior-level governance, law, journalism, human rights, conflict resolution, motivational training and community networking. The CDR board consists of:

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The background of the entire page is a vibrant orange color. Overlaid on this are several large, detailed images of autumn leaves, likely maple leaves, showing a mix of green, yellow, and brown hues. The leaves are arranged in a way that they appear to be scattered across the surface, with some overlapping. The central focus is a large, single leaf that is positioned vertically, with its stem pointing downwards. The text 'Intra-Kashmir Women's Conference' is printed across the middle of this central leaf.

Intra-Kashmir Women's Conference

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