

Queen's disastrous trip to Pakistan, India, threatens Commonwealth meet

by Mary Burdman and Ramtanu Maitra

As the Queen's ill-conceived two-week tour of Pakistan and India limps to a close, concern is mounting in Britain that the unabated tensions will spill over into the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, in the last week of October.

"Britain attaches immense importance to the Commonwealth, and its successive governments, whether headed by the Tories or Labour, have been conscious of the fact that India is at the heart of Commonwealth. . . . This is reflected in the fact that at CHOGM, slated to meet in the last week of this month in Edinburgh in what would be the biggest ever in Britain, Mr. I.K. Gujral will be the first prime minister to address the conference after the secretary general and Mr. Tony Blair," the *Hindustan Times* wrote on Oct. 14. But much could go wrong. Even as all the Queen's mis-steps were just beginning, the *Hindustan Times* was already noting that the ruling British Labour Party itself has a long-standing policy on Jammu and Kashmir unacceptable to either India or Pakistan. At the Labour Party conference in Brighton a month ago, Derek Fatchett, minister of state of the Commonwealth and Foreign Office, attended a meeting on "Justice for Jammu and Kashmir" and there endorsed the "principle of self-determination"—including possible independence—for the state.

"The war of words between Delhi and London is threatening to overshadow next week's Commonwealth conference in Edinburgh," the *London Times* wrote on Oct. 16. Blair is now scrambling to salvage the situation—and his role as the "savior" of the monarchy—and has ordered a "major effort of communication to explain more widely the thus-far unreported success stories of the visit." But he is doing uphill work.

A more sombre note was struck by the *London Guardian* the same day: It did not take this trip to India, to show that the Queen's role in the Commonwealth to be something of an anomaly. Formally, the Commonwealth was no longer "British" as of 1965, when the Secretariat was set up; in reality, this principle was established in 1949, when free India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, agreed that the Republic of India would join the body, and still accept the Queen's headship, but only "as a symbol of the free association of member states." There will be heavy spinning to be done at Edinburgh, but India is not the only problem. There is Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, there is the question of Nigeria, and others. And, the *Guardian* wrote, there is no clear succes-

sor to the Queen at the Commonwealth. This institution may have to "think the unthinkable: . . . that it may face a very different—and much less certain—future."

In the wake of the British and worldwide reaction against the British monarchy after the killing of Princess Diana, the future of the monarchy's premier source of power could be in serious trouble.

Blair's Labour blamed

Bickering is taking over the situation in Britain also. In what has become a succession of accusations, counter-accusations, and denials that anyone said, what everyone clearly just did say, a royal official has cast all the blame for the disasters of the India trip onto the Labour government. A senior official travelling with the Queen said on Oct 15: "The Queen is here on the advice of ministers in Britain. The Queen does not go out on a limb." Buckingham Palace then said that such comments should not be seen as criticism of the government!

To "mend" matters, both the palace and government pointed the finger at the Indian press, claiming that it was making a "mountain out of a non-existent molehill." The British High Commissioner in India, Sir David Gore-Booth, put his foot in deeper, saying: "I find some of the reaction more invented than real. The Indian press, like the British press, is always on the lookout for gaffes and bloopers."

The Indian government was not pleased. The *Times* on Oct. 16 quoted an Indian government source saying that the Labour Party had a "hidden agenda" to create an independent Kashmir, claiming that Labour Foreign Secretary Robin Cook had told Indian authorities that the Kashmir issue was an "article of faith" with Labour. "The hidden agenda was ultimately to obtain an independent state of Jammu and Kashmir," the sources were quoted. "Cook genuinely believes that there is an unfinished business of Partition," through which the British divided the subcontinent into India's and Pakistan in 1947.

The Queen should look to her CHOGM. Prime Minister Gujral was a prominent supporter of Mahatma Gandhi's all-out effort to oust the British Raj, the "Quit India" campaign, and was, along with most Indian political leaders, jailed by the British in their brutal attempts at repression in the early 1940s. It is also important to note that, despite the weaknesses of both India and Pakistan's governments, Gujral and Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif have re-started direct bilateral talks and installed a "hot-line" telephone—poten-

tially a critical breakthrough for the situation on the subcontinent.

Indian Civil Aviation Minister Jayanthi Natarajan said that the visit had been “successful from the Queen’s point of view,” but, he added, “I personally believe it was not necessary for Mr. Cook to talk about Kashmir on the eve of the Queen’s visit, because it certainly shadowed the trip, and it wouldn’t have taken long for us to start talking about Ireland.”

K.R. Malkani, senior spokesman for the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party, said, “Your High Commissioner, your foreign secretary, even the Queen kept on pestering us on the issue of Kashmir and we resent that. We do not advise you on Ireland and we don’t expect you to be advising us on Kashmir.”

Deeper and deeper

The Queen’s “progress” was doomed from the start. Although her trip to Pakistan was, superficially, smoother than that in India, there were problems. Several Pakistani Muslim leaders lambasted the government for the “enthusiastic protocol” accorded to Elizabeth during her stay in Pakistan, and criticized the country’s top leadership for their “submissive” behavior before the Queen. At Friday prayers, leaders were bitterly criticized for their “un-Islamic gestures,” targetting in particular National Assembly Speaker Illahi Bakhsh Soomro. One cleric said that Soomro had “insulted” the whole nation, by telling the Queen when he welcomed her in parliament on Oct. 8 that the creation of Pakistan in 1947 was the outcome of the enlightened policies of Britain.

Then British Foreign Secretary Cook opened his mouth. According to accounts in the Pakistani and Indian press, Cook said in Islamabad on Oct. 9, “We are no more the British Empire to fix the direction of any state in the subcontinent,” but then, he immediately referred to the “new Empire”: Britain, India, and Pakistan share the platform of the Commonwealth, and London is always ready to help the South Asian neighbors in creating a conducive environment to settle their differences. The Pakistan Foreign Ministry reported that, during his meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Cook had “expressed his willingness to help achieve a negotiated and peaceful settlement of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute.”

Following Cook’s officiousness, came Elizabeth’s turn to meddle. Speaking to a joint session of the Pakistani parliament on Oct. 8, she called upon Pakistan and India to reconcile their differences and urged the two countries to “take stock and renew efforts to end historic disagreements.”

The British agenda

The Queen arrived in New Delhi, the London *Times* wrote on Oct. 13, “to a hostile reception in much of the national press, reflecting suspicions—denied in London—that she is being used to promote a hidden political agenda in the West for a solution to the Kashmir crisis. It promises to be a tense week. . . . Some left-wing politicians have questioned why the head of the former imperial power should be invited to share in celebrations to mark 50 years of independence.”

The immediate trigger for the controversy, the paper reported, was the behavior of the royal entourage during the previous week in Pakistan. The Queen herself, as well as Foreign Secretary Cook, offered, if in somewhat subtly worded proposals, to “internationalize” the Kashmir conflict, suggesting that Britain could have a role in “mediating” between India and Pakistan.

According to the British Broadcasting Corp., this drew an angry response from Indian Prime Minister Gujral, while he was visiting Egypt. He denounced Britain as a “third-rate power,” that had no business “meddling,” in what was an internal Indian affair, and one that had to be settled with Pakistan bilaterally. A similar protest was made by the Indian Foreign Ministry.

An article in the Indian publication *Asian Age* commented that Blair’s Labour government “has decided to exert pressure on India, and the beginning is being made, with the supposedly non-political visit of the apolitical monarch. India is not falling over itself to receive the Queen, contrary to the expectations of the British government. The monarchy . . . cannot really hope to revive its sagging image, by conjuring up visions of the defeated Raj.” Obviously, the visit was not the “goodwill mission” it was being hyped up to be, or else, “the Queen would not have stuck her imperial nose into what is not her business, and Cook would have refrained from his totally uncalled-for remarks on Kashmir.”

Shekhar Gupta, editor-in-chief of the *Indian Express*, a leading Indian paper, stated, “I don’t know why this man [Cook] is doing all this as part of her entourage.” Gupta charged that the British royal family had already been tainted by Diana’s death. “If royalty comes to India with lectures to us about Kashmir, then that really is too much.”

On Oct. 10, an *Express* editorial, “The Empire Doctrine—The Natives Can Do Without English Wisdom,” described the Queen as a “walking poster of a tarnished monarchy, a one-woman pageant for a lost empire.”

The *Times of India*, carried a story, “India, U.K. Ties at Low Ebb as Queen Elizabeth’s Visit Nears.” The Oct. 13 masthead of the *Times* quoted British writer Malcolm Muggeridge on the Queen: “Frumphish and banal.”

The *Telegraph*, in Calcutta, noted that Prince Philip would not be offered a “fat, overfed tiger to shoot,” as he reportedly was in 1961, by the Maharajah of Jaipur.

The Queen’s reception soured steadily. The Indian government protested the British placing of the Queen’s name above that of the Indian President on an invitation, and on Oct. 13, refused to allow the British Royal Marines Band to play at the opening of a British exhibition at India’s National Museum. Then, every British diplomat, except the High Commissioner, was barred from the Indian state banquet to welcome the Queen.

On Oct. 12, as the Queen began her visit to India, the *Pioneer* quoted Prime Minister Gujral denouncing Britain. Gujral made his “vitriolic” attack on the British government in a discussion in Cairo on Oct. 11, describing Britain as a

“third-rate power,” nursing illusions of grandeur about its colonial past. He told Egyptian intellectuals that Britain created the problem in Kashmir when it divided India. “Now they are wanting to give us a solution,” he is said to have remarked, sarcastically.

On the prime minister’s return to Delhi, government sources explained the prime minister’s outburst as a reaction to a series of “uncalled for” remarks by British officials on the Kashmir issue. “Even the Queen was dragged into this by them. She said somewhere that she was ready to use her good offices to help resolve divergent positions,” one official said. “The prime minister was exasperated.”

The government is also upset with a recent remark by the British High Commissioner in New Delhi, who described as “preposterous” the demand by some Indian leaders for an apology for the massacre by British troops commanded by Gen. Reginald Dyer, of Indians gathered at a protest meeting in 1919, at the closed garden of Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. This, one of the worst offenses of the British Raj, had been widely condoned in Britain as having “saved India.” Government sources said that while India has never officially demanded an apology, it was most insensitive of High Commissioner Gore-Booth to use such provocative expressions which revealed his “arrogant and colonial mindset.”

Prof. Jagmohan Singh, nephew of Bhagat Singh, showed up at Rajghat on Oct. 8, to demand an apology from the Queen for the massacre during her visit to Amritsar. Professor Singh, along with family members of the victims of the massacre, reiterated the demand for an apology, following a special prayer meeting held at Rajghat.

Instead, they first got pabulum, and then insult. In her speech at a state banquet in New Delhi on Oct. 13, the Queen said: The Jallianwala Bagh incident was a “distressing example” of the “difficult episodes” in the history of Indo-British relations. But the two sides must learn to live with them. “History cannot be rewritten, however much we might sometimes wish otherwise. It has its moments of sadness as well as of gladness. We must learn from the sadness and build on the gladness,” she said.

Prince Philip added insult to injury. Entering the Jallianwala Bagh memorial park on Oct. 14, the sign at the entrance of which states, “This place is saturated with the blood of about 2,000 Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim patriots who were martyred in a non-violent struggle to free India from British domination,” he commented: “It wasn’t 2,000, was it? I was in the Navy with Dyer’s son.” The “official,” i.e., British, death toll was 379, with over 1,200 injured.

By Oct. 16, the situation had collapsed into a brawl. “Has one put one’s foot in it this time?” asked the *Guardian*, featuring the “diary of a debacle.” The latest in “the Queen’s blunder-strewn visit to the Indian subcontinent” is the abrupt cancellation by the Indian government, of a speech the Queen thought she was due to make in Madras that night. “British embarrassment” has grown, as the Indian government has

“retaliated” for Prince Philip’s remarks on Oct. 14, about the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Queen’s cold reaction at the memorial, and the Queen’s and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook’s meddling about Kashmir.

News of Philip’s comments spread rapidly in the city of Amritsar. Headlines included: “Prince Lights Another Fire,” and “Jallianwala Vastly Exaggerated: Philip.”

During the visit, the Queen behaved like a dead squid. She was requested by S.K. Mukherjee, the custodian of the memorial, “to write a few lines — just anything — in the visitors’ book. She did not smile; she did not say anything. She just signed the book” — as “Elizabeth R.”

The Queen’s welcome from Sikhs in Amritsar was not even covered in the New Delhi press. The “welcome” was also tempered. Demonstrators carried signs saying: “Killer Queen Go Back!” The newspapers were, instead, dedicated to complaints about the Queen’s failure to make a formal apology for the massacre, and comments about her absurd apparel, described as a “frilly tent.”

There was an even worse snub. The Queen had thought she was scheduled to give a speech in Madras, capital of the state of Tamil Nadu, at a reception given by the governor, and aides had prepared a three-page statement. However, New Delhi suddenly announced on Oct. 15 that Indian protocol decreed that anyone making a state visit to India, is only allowed to give speeches in New Delhi.

The British Foreign Office has tried to pass off the cancellation as a “misunderstanding” about a proposed “toast” she was to have made. Indian External Affairs spokesman Talmiz Ahmed said: “This is British ineptitude. I think they scheduled a speech for her in the program assuming they would be able to bully Indians into acceptance of something completely without precedence. When they did not succeed, they thought they could find a way out by blaming bungling Indian officials. . . . At no time stage did the British side ever suggest that the Queen would like to give a banquet speech in Madras, so the question of turning it down did not arise.”

“Relations between Britain and India are at a crossroads,” a Labour Member of Parliament close to India told the *Guardian*. “It is about a former colony making a stand. They are saying, ‘You may be the Queen of England, but here you are just like any other head of state.’ ”

It is also well-remembered in India, that several leaders of the Sikh separatist insurrection of the 1980s found refuge in Britain, the *Guardian* reported. “The Indian establishment has long suspected the British government of sympathy for the separatist cause.” Prime Minister Gujral had warned the Queen that visiting the Punjab would not be a good idea, but she did so anyway.

“Aside from the running diplomatic row which has accompanied this visit, what has been so striking has been the Queen’s mortality: for Indian papers, at least, she is ordinary flesh and blood, a woman whose demeanor and dress sense are up for dissection.”