

## ORAL HISTORY

### *India at the Rabat Islamic Summit (1969)*

Gurbachan Singh

*Ambassador Gurbachan Singh was the Indian Ambassador to Morocco and who, as acting Leader of the Indian Delegation, participated in one of the Plenary Sessions of the Summit Conference of Islamic Countries at Rabat in September 1969, provides an insider's account*

**Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ):** Sir, why was a Summit Conference of Islamic countries organized at Rabat?

**Gurbachan Singh (GS):** On 21 August 1969, there was an attempted arson at the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest shrine of Islam. The culprit was later identified as Michael Rohan, an Australian national.

A meeting of Arab Foreign Ministers was urgently summoned to consider this development. They met in Cairo within three days on 24 August.

The United Arab Republic (Egypt and Syria) considered that a Summit meeting only of Arab countries should be convened. However, the representatives of Saudi Arabia and Morocco considered that it would be more appropriate to expand the meet, to include all Islamic countries. Saudi Arabia and Morocco were then entrusted with the task of organizing a meeting; whether only of Arab countries or a larger one of Islamic countries. After further deliberations, a committee was formed to prepare for a Summit Conference. It consisted of two representatives each from the Arab world (Saudi Arabia and Morocco), Asia (Iran and Malaysia) and Africa (Niger and Somalia).

The Preparatory Committee met at Rabat on 8 and 9 September 1969. At the last minute, Pakistan contrived to get itself included on the plea that it was the largest "Islamic" state. In fact, the Pakistani representative, then Foreign Secretary Yusuf, arrived at Rabat only for the second day of the meeting. On the first day, it was represented by its Ambassador to Morocco.

The Preparatory Committee recommended the convening of a Summit Conference to be held at Rabat from 22-24 September 1969. They suggested the

following two criteria for countries to be invited to the meetings:

- (a) countries having a Muslim majority population; or
- (b) those having a Muslim head of state.

**IFAJ:** What were India's interests in wishing to participate in the conference?

**GS:** India's interest in matters of concern to Islamic countries, which also touch the sentiments of a sizeable segment of the Indian population, dates back to pre-independence days. It was because of this interest that many Indian political leaders, even during British rule, raised their voice against the abolition of Khilafat after the First World War. The partition of India, and the carving out of an Islamic state from its Western and Eastern provinces, did not signify the end of this interest. India continued to have a very large Muslim population. Besides, the desideratum of a multi-religious and multi-lingual society with a composite culture was basic to the country's ideals. Pakistan's persistent effort to characterize India as a Hindu country, where adherents of other faiths, particularly Muslims, would have no place, has not changed the reality.

Thus, the idea of Indian representation at International Islamic Conferences did not suddenly occur when the Islamic Summit at Rabat was convened. In fact, this was going to be the fifth Islamic meeting where India would have been represented.

The foreign policy of a country is obviously designed to serve its national interests. At the same time, it necessarily reflects the internal situations of the country. As a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious entity, India has chosen to be a secular state. But, this secularism does not imply a repudiation of religion. It implies, rather, equal respect for all the religions of its peoples. It is this principle which underlines the concept of a composite national heritage and gives meaning to the phrase, "unity in diversity". Or, perhaps more aptly, in the words of Swami Ranganathananda, "unity in variety".

Our secularism denotes the absence of an official state religion, where, however, the state does not practise or condone any discrimination based on religion. The US, India, Turkey, Nigeria, Indonesia, Ivory Coast and many others are secular states, as opposed, for example, to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Maldives, where the state religion is Islam, or Israel where it is Judaism.

If, then, India is to remain a secular state as, indeed, it has so proclaimed, the government and people must pay equal regard to the religious susceptibilities of all sections of the nation, without offending the Constitution or the law of the land.

In the domestic context, then, when we count amongst our citizens the adherents of all the major and many of the minor religions of the world, it is important that they do not come to regard religion and nationality as mutually exclusive concepts.

Thus, the decision of the Government of India to participate in Islamic Conferences should be seen to be based on sound reasoning. It should also be kept in mind that our participation in such gatherings has always been opposed by Pakistan. This is to be expected, for the *raison d'être* of its creation is that Muslims and Hindus are two separate nations. India has never and cannot possibly agree with this theory. Hence, the constant dissension between the two.

**IFAJ:** Was India formally invited to the conference?

**GS:** Emphatically yes. I recall the sequence of events very clearly. On Monday 22 September 1969, the Islamic Summit Conference was officially inaugurated at 5.30 p.m. at the Hilton Hotel in Rabat. I attended this as part of the Diplomatic Corps along with other invitees.

The first plenary session was held on Tuesday, 23 September in the morning, I had, as usual, gone to my office where, at about 11 a.m., I received a call from Morocco's Chief of Protocol summoning me immediately to meet the Foreign Minister Mr. Laraki, at the Hilton Hotel. I went there, was waved into the restricted area personally by the Chief of Protocol, and found the Foreign Minister waiting for me. Our talk took place on the steps at the entrance to the hotel.

He told me that the conference, then still in session, had unanimously decided to invite the Government of India to send an official delegation to the conference. He added that this was at the proposal of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, seconded by his own Sovereign. I questioned him about the "unanimous" invitation and specifically asked whether Pakistan was part of the consensus. He answered in the affirmative and went on to ask if there was not any Indian delegation somewhere in Europe which could be diverted to Rabat to attend this conference. I replied that there was no such delegation to my knowledge but that I would convey the invitation to the Government of India

and hoped that they could urgently send a delegation to Rabat. According to my estimation, I added, it could not arrive before the following day at the earliest. Meanwhile, I proposed that Dr. Abdul Alim, then Vice-Chancellor of the Aligarh Muslim University, who happened to be in Morocco having attended the 1000th Anniversary celebrations of the University of Fez, could represent India in the second plenary session that afternoon. The Minister's reaction to this was spontaneous and in the negative. He asserted that this was a governmental conference and that it was I, as Ambassador of India, who should be acting leader of the delegation and attend the afternoon plenary at 5 p.m. I returned to my office, immediately telephoned Shri Kewal Singh, Secretary (West) in the Ministry of External Affairs, and informed him of the development. He authorized me to attend the afternoon session and agreed to my proposal that I should ask Dr. Abdul Alim and my Second Secretary, Mr. Ishrat Aziz, to accompany me.

If corroboration is needed, I quote a portion from Mr. Laraki's press statement:

*After consultations amongst the heads of states, it has been decided that the conference addresses an official invitation to India to be represented at governmental level. The Ambassador of India was received this morning. He will assume the leadership of the Indian delegation while waiting for the arrival of the Ministerial delegation which should be here tomorrow.*

*(As published in the local media on the following day)*

**IFAJ:** Did India participate in the conference?

**GS:** That afternoon, some minutes before the scheduled time for the second session, I arrived at the venue and was ushered into the ante-room where the heads of delegations were gathering. Some leaders, whom I had known earlier, greeted me most affably. They included Mr. Etemadi, Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Mr. Rahamatallah Abdulla, the Foreign Minister of Sudan (who had been my neighbour in Lagos, when he was the Sudanese Ambassador there and I was with the Indian High Commission as First Secretary) and one or two others. I introduced myself to some of the others including the Shah of Iran and the King of Saudi Arabia, who all greeted me cordially. President Yahya Khan to whom also I introduced myself was cool in his response. Just before 5 p.m., we were ushered into the conference hall. Members of delegations including Dr. Abdul Alim and Mr. Ishrat Aziz, were already seated around the conference table.

When the Plenary was called into session, the Chairman of the conference – the King of Morocco – extended a warm welcome to the Indian delegation and announced that I would be representing India pending the arrival of the official delegation. Later, my request to intervene was accepted and I made the following statement:

*Your Majesty President, Your Majesties, Your Highnesses, Your Excellencies and Gentlemen:*

*It is a matter of gratification that the interest and concern of the people of India, particularly her 60 million Muslim citizens, in the grave happenings in West Asia have been recognized and that India has been invited to participate in this conference. I should like to convey to Your Majesty and through you to this august gathering, our satisfaction at the unanimous invitation which has been conveyed to the Government of India. I have just received a message that a delegation led by His Excellency Mr. F.A. Ahmad, Minister for Industrial Development, Government of India, has already left New Delhi [for Rabat]. God willing, they should be with us tomorrow. In the meanwhile, it is my honour and privilege to assume the leadership of the Indian delegation which [also] has as a member, a distinguished scholar, Dr. Abdul Aleem, Vice-Chancellor of the Aligarh Muslim University.*

*The government and the people of India who have throughout been gravely concerned at the serious situation in West Asia have been deeply shocked and pained at the most recent outrage perpetrated in the holy city of Jerusalem. We feel that the continued occupation of Arab lands by Israel and particularly of the city of Jerusalem, in defiance of UN resolutions, is a matter of the utmost concern. The shocking incident of setting fire to the ancient shrine of Al-Aqsa, which came as the most recent climax, makes it all the more imperative that the Security Council's resolutions, calling upon Israel to end this aggression, should be implemented.*

*We sincerely hope and pray that the deliberations of this conference will lead to the adoption of conclusions which would result in a just, honourable and speedy solution of the grave crisis, which exists in West Asia. India, as always, will be prepared to play its part in seeking such a solution.*

The conference continued its deliberations until almost 10 p.m. No objection was raised by any delegation to my presence, nor to the fact that India was being represented by its ambassador as acting leader of an official delegation.

**IFAJ:** What were the issues discussed at the conference?

**GS:** According to the recommendations of the Preparatory Committee, the conference was meant to discuss only two questions namely, the fire at the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the situation of Jerusalem. However, the first Plenary Session decided to include the following additional points:

- The withdrawal of Israel from all occupied territories;
- Restitution of the rights of the Palestinian people;
- Implementation of the decisions of the conference;
- Next meeting of Foreign Ministers;
- Cooperation amongst Islamic countries; and
- Adoption of a unified position on these questions.

**IFAJ:** What happened then?

**GS:** The following day, on the 24th morning, Mr. Laraki asked me to see him before the conference was to reconvene. He said that news of the Ahmedabad riots was beginning to cause some disquiet amongst the delegations and suggested, on a personal and friendly basis, that I should not participate in the morning session. I readily agreed and asked the other members of the delegation to attend the conference. I busied myself with arrangements for the arrival of the delegation from India, due at 3.30 that afternoon.

The scheduled hour of the conference was 10 a.m. but it was postponed first to 11 a.m., then to noon while it was finally announced after 1 p.m. that there would be no morning session. During this time members of all the delegations had waited in the conference hall. Rumours were floating around. It transpired that the President of Pakistan was refusing to leave his villa until he received an assurance that the official Indian delegation would not be permitted to participate in the meeting. Many leaders of delegations attempted to telephone him but reportedly he would not even answer the telephone.

He even declined to see the rulers of Saudi Arabia and Iran who, as reported, had gone to his villa in an effort to persuade him to attend and save the

conference from breaking up. The morning had passed without any solution in sight.

The leader and members of the delegation from India arrived at 3.30 p.m. and were received at Rabat airport with full honours. From the airport, they drove in an official cortege to the villa allotted for their residence.

Soon after their arrival at the villa, Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed received an emissary of the King of Morocco. He extended a warm welcome to the delegation on behalf of His Majesty and said that he had been asked to convey a message from his King, in his capacity as Chairman of the conference. Due mainly to the news of the unfortunate events that had taken place in India during the previous few days, three countries had objected to the participation of India. In the circumstances, in order to save the conference from collapse which would be a tragedy, would the Indian delegation agree to accept the status of an observer? Mr. Fakhruddin expressed himself firmly to the effect that he was unable to accept this change in status. The emissary then suggested that, in this case, again in the interest of the success of the conference, would India not be good enough to voluntarily withdraw from the conference and thus ensure its success? The Minister replied that the Indian delegation had been unanimously invited to the conference and having come all the way from India at extremely short notice, it would not be possible to accept this suggestion either.

Not long thereafter, another emissary came to the villa and again emphasized the importance of the conference coming to a successful conclusion. He said that there was no doubt that India had been unanimously invited, that its representative had actually participated in the conference, and that India was in fact a member of the conference. However, in view of the crisis situation that existed, would not the Indian delegation make a contribution in order to bring the conference to a successful conclusion? Since the other two suggestions had not been found acceptable, the Moroccan Minister now suggested that given the fact of India's established membership, the Indian delegation might voluntarily agree to abstain from attending the concluding session. He elaborated that most of the drafting had been completed and that the closing session would really amount to a formality. The leader explained the position of his delegation, again emphasizing that India was not responsible for the impasse and was being asked to accept a position which was untenable simply because one country was using

a veto to disrupt the conference. The leader of the Indian delegation again expressed his inability to accept this suggestion.

The position of the Indian delegation was conveyed to the Chairman of the conference. The leaders, who had been in conclave all afternoon, then decided to send a delegation of four of their number to plead with the Indian delegation. Accordingly, at about 8.20 p.m. that evening, the leaders of the Afghan, Malaysian, Niger, and UAR delegations came to call on the leader of the Indian delegation.

Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister of Malaysia, briefly explained to Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad, the developments during the day. He clarified that they had all come very reluctantly and on behalf of the leaders of all other delegations, who were conferring amongst themselves. It was indeed most embarrassing for him personally to have to undertake such a mission. (The other leaders expressed similar thoughts). The Malaysian Prime Minister continued that the President of Pakistan had refused to leave his villa that morning unless he was given an assurance that the Indian delegation would not be present at the conference. All efforts to persuade him to relent had been to no avail. The Malaysian Prime Minister added that the news from Ahmedabad provided additional justification to the Pakistani delegation, who used this to support their stand. He also underlined the importance of the conference coming to a successful conclusion, not only because of the purpose of its meeting, but also since it was the first such gathering in the history of Islam. While almost all the leaders were in favour of Indian participation, Pakistan adamantly refused to change its position and, if Pakistan abstained, it would be followed by three other countries. This would be a catastrophe since the conference would then be a failure. He appealed, therefore, to the Indian delegation to save the conference and either to accept a change in status or to voluntarily remain absent from the concluding session.

Dr. Etemadi, the Prime Minister of Afghanistan and Mr. Anwar El Saadat, UAR Vice-President, supplemented the Malaysian Prime Minister's pleas, while clarifying that they too were not there in their individual capacities, but as emissaries bearing a message from the leaders of the conference. The Foreign Minister of Niger remained silent throughout. His presence amongst the emissaries was no doubt a symbolic representation from Sub-Sahara Africa.



The leader of the Indian delegation explained that while the success of the conference was no doubt important, and India had shown consistent support for the items on the original agenda, the Indian delegation had come to Rabat in response to the unanimous invitation of the conference and out of regard for the wishes of nations assembled there. He said that if, initially, India had not been invited it would have been regrettable but understandable. Further, if India had initially been invited as an observer, the Government of India could have decided whether or not to accept the invitation and, if so, at what level it would be represented. However, having been extended a unanimous invitation by the conference, it was extraordinary to ask the Indian delegation to withdraw or refrain from participation in the final session. He emphasized that India would be the last country to try to wreck the first Islamic Summit Meeting in history. In fact, he added, it was Pakistan which was trying to wreck the conference. First, agreeing to an invitation to India and later threatening to withdraw if India attended the meeting. He concluded that since it was the conference, in plenary, that had unanimously extended an invitation to India, it was only the conference itself that could take a decision to exclude India. In that case he would expect a communication in writing. He added that it should be clear to all that it was not India but Pakistan and those supporting it that were posing a threat to the success of the conference.

Pakistan's volte-face, it is evident, was not because of the Ahmedabad riots or a governmental delegation or a Sikh acting leader of the Indian delegation, though all in turn were presented as reasons. It is also on record that Pakistan was part of the consensus when an invitation had been extended to the Government of India. The real reason was that, when word got back to Pakistan of the invitation to India, there was a spate of protests in the country including, significantly, by many political opponents of the regime such as Asghar Khan, Bhutto, Mumtaz Daultana and others. When these were conveyed to the Pakistani President at Rabat, he was also warned by his own colleagues back home that, if he countenanced Indian participation in the conference, his own political future would be in jeopardy. As the Pakistan Times of 25 September editorialized: "The people would like to know, when the delegation returns, how and why this was allowed to happen..." No wonder then that Yahya Khan remained adamant, even at the risk of wrecking the conference. The instinct of self-preservation is indeed the strongest instinct.

The emissaries returned to the conference with the Indian reactions to its message. The King of Morocco had organized a banquet that evening as the climax to the conclusion of the conference. Since the impasse continued late into the night, the King's banquet began only after midnight when it became evident that no further efforts would be possible that day.

The following morning, i.e. on Thursday, 25 September, the Prime Minister of Malaysia sent a letter to Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed through his Foreign Secretary, thanking him for the "sacrifice" he had made to the cause of Islam in order to save the conference. Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed expressed his surprise to the Malaysian Foreign Secretary and reiterated the Indian position. He also immediately sent a written answer to Tunku Abdul Rahman, expressing surprise at the reference to a "sacrifice" and again clarifying the Indian position. Efforts continued all that morning and the plenary session, tentatively scheduled for midday, was again postponed. Earlier, two members of the Indian delegation who had gone to the conference hall to ascertain the situation, were told that no session of the conference was taking place. They were denied access to the venue even though they carried valid conference credentials.

It later became known that the final plenary session was to be held at 4 p.m. for the adoption of the Declaration and Resolution. Immediately upon hearing this, the leader of the Indian delegation sent a most immediate letter to the Chairman of the conference informing him of the presence of the Indian delegation and asking when they should arrive to participate in the conference. No reply was received to this letter. It was later learnt that the conference met at 5 p.m. without any Indian representation. At this session an official Declaration and a Resolution were adopted. The preamble to the Declaration describes the Indian representation as being that of "the Muslim community of India." There was no reference in the Declaration to India having participated, despite the fact that the Indian Ambassador to Morocco and two others had been present during one of the three plenary sessions of the conference and who had obviously represented the Government of India.

In his concluding address to the conference, the King of Morocco is reported to have made a reference to the Muslims in India suffering persecution. Although the official text of the King's speech did not contain this reference, it was reported by some of the news agencies and journalists present at the closing session. The news had appeared in sections of the international press, including

some Indian papers. In the Pakistan papers, of course, it received banner headlines.

The Indian delegation issued a press note contradicting the reference in the Declaration to the representatives of the “Muslim community of India” and to dispel the impression that India had voluntarily abstained from the meeting.

On the 26th morning the leader of the Indian delegation received a visit from the Moroccan Foreign Minister, on behalf of the King of Morocco, to explain the Moroccan position. His explanation, in brief, was on the following lines:

- 1) Morocco was all along keen on Indian participation and had, in fact, worked for it.
- 2) India had been unanimously invited by the conference and that a part of the delegation had, in fact, participated in one of the plenary sessions. Thus, India was and continued to be a participant in this conference.
- 3) Unfortunately, mainly as a result of the reporting of riots in India, Pakistan had come to the conclusion that they could not accept Indian participation at the governmental level. In this attitude, Pakistan was supported by some of its friends.
- 4) This abstention by three or four important members of the conference would have led to its failure, a result which all wished to avoid. In order to prevent this, it had been suggested that India should voluntarily remain absent from the final session. He reiterated that India officially remained a member of the conference and would be shown as having participated in it.
- 5) The description of Indian representation having been shown as that of the “Muslim community of India” was a compromise formula.

In conclusion, he expressed the hope that this unhappy episode would not affect the bilateral relations between Morocco and India.

Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed thanked the Minister for his visit and observed that it was an unprecedented and most extraordinary situation in which the Indian delegation found itself. Apart from the manner in which the Indian delegation had been treated and been prevented from attending the conference, the incorrect description of Indian participation in the conference could not be accepted by the Government of India. Not only was this description erroneous and contrary to the facts, it was not in accord with what the Foreign Minister himself had said at a press conference, when he had announced that an official

Indian delegation had been invited to the conference. This formulation also tantamounted to interference in the internal affairs of India. He reiterated that his delegation and his government could not and would not accept this.

The Indian delegation left Morocco that afternoon.

It needs to be clarified that, during their stay at Rabat, the members of the Indian delegation were accorded all courtesies and full hospitality. The Moroccan government had made suitable arrangements for the stay, security, transport and every comfort of the Indian delegation which were the same as had been made for all other delegations.

**IFAJ:** How has the incident at Rabat affected India's relations with OIC members?

**GS:** The unprecedented developments at Rabat certainly had consequences. These may be viewed both internationally and bilaterally, as well as in the short and long-term perspectives.

The efforts to renege on the unanimous invitation to India, and failing that, to change the description of Indian representation in the official record are certainly unprecedented. It is perhaps the first time in the history of international conferences that an official delegation, unanimously invited by the conference itself after it had commenced its formal deliberations (and part of the delegation had already participated in an earlier session), was prevented from attending the concluding session. Whatever may have been the justification for this action, the fact remains that the conference submitted to the blackmailing pressure of Pakistan, to exclude the Indian delegation. The irony is even greater when it is recalled that Pakistan was a party to the invitation to India, the commitment having been made by no less a person than the President of that country, and that the Pakistan delegation, headed by President Yahya Khan, was present at the afternoon plenary session of the conference on 22 September while the Indian delegation, under the acting leadership of its Ambassador to Morocco, was present at the conference table. This session lasted for five hours during which, even when I had made a brief intervention, not a word was said objecting to India's presence at the table. Nor, before the commencement of the conference, when the President of Pakistan and I met in the ante-room reserved for leaders of delegations. The presence of an official Indian delegation was tacitly accepted as, indeed, it was normal for it to be after the conference had the same morning

extended a unanimous invitation to the Government of India to participate. When objections were raised the following morning, the whole day was spent in private negotiations. The question of India's participation was never formally put to the full conference which was thus not given an opportunity to reaffirm or withdraw the unanimous invitation of the previous day. This would place the major onus for the decision on the Chairman of the conference especially since most participants, except Pakistan, Jordan, Iran and Turkey, subsequently informed the Government of India that they had not been opposed to India's presence.

The second consideration, legally more serious, is the alteration in the character of Indian representation in the Final Declaration of the conference. This document refers to "the Muslim community of India" as having been represented at the meeting. This is absolutely incorrect. The members of the Indian delegation, who actually participated in one session, were representing the Government of India and the whole country, not only the Muslim citizens of India. In the circumstances, to describe Indian representation in the manner that it has been, is a travesty of fact and certainly unwarranted.

Strong protests were later conveyed to all participating governments, emphasizing that since the declaration and final resolution of the conference had been lodged with the UN and since the UN had circulated them amongst member states, the actual nature of Indian representation (as being that by an official delegation) was also being clarified to the United Nations and its member states.

Bilateral implications ensued from the incident at Rabat with several countries, particularly Pakistan, Jordan, Iran, Turkey and Morocco. Relations with Pakistan being in the unfortunate state that they were, nothing different or better could be expected. It once again highlighted the fact that Pakistan's attitude towards such conferences would be guided more by its obsession with India rather than concern with the agenda before a particular gathering.

Subsequently, most of the participating countries clarified their position to the Government of India. Some, e.g. UAR and Lebanon made public declarations. In fact, the UAR sent a special mission to New Delhi, led by a Cabinet Minister to explain their position to the Government of India. The ambassadors of several participating countries similarly explained the stand taken by their respective delegations at Rabat. Other governments explained

their position to the Indian embassies in their respective capitals. On the basis of these explanations, it is evident that the majority of member countries were in favour of India's participation as a full member. However, Pakistan's volte-face, along with the intense desire of the King of Morocco (and some others) to ensure that the conference be seen to have succeeded, induced their acquiescence to Pakistan's blackmail. If Pakistan's sole contention was that it was concerned over the Ahmedabad disturbances, the proper and logical course would have been to raise this matter when the proposal to invite India was initially approved in the first plenary session. Apart from anything else, this episode was a contravention of the basics of diplomacy.

Jordan, Turkey, and Iran, who stood by Pakistan in the intransigence of its delegation, each later communicated with the Government of India. Both Turkey and Iran maintained that they had at first endeavoured to persuade Pakistan to attend the conference but, when it was found that President Yahya Khan would not relent, their position perforce had to change. Both delegations maintained that, with Syria and Iraq having already refrained from attending, the conference would certainly have lost its significance if Pakistan, followed by Jordan, had also withdrawn. Besides, if Pakistan had stayed out, their ties with that country, linked to common membership of CENTO, and RCD, would have been affected. Hence, mainly for saving the conference, in addition to the consideration of their special ties with Pakistan, they reluctantly decided to abstain from attending the conference if Pakistan and Jordan were not present. The Government of Jordan maintained that they did not take any anti-Indian stand at Rabat. However, from all information available to the Government of India, it emerged that the Jordanian delegation, led by its King, had shown complete solidarity with Pakistan.

The Government of Morocco, as organizers of the meeting and in view of the fact that the King of Morocco was Chairman of the conference would bear a special responsibility for this episode. As Chairman, King Hassan no doubt expended great effort in trying to persuade President Yahya Khan not to wreck the conference. He also made efforts to persuade the Indian delegation to voluntarily abstain or accept a change of status. However, such efforts were made only in private discussions amongst leaders of delegations. Since the conference in the plenary session, had extended a unanimous invitation to the Government of India, the problem should legitimately and logically, have been placed before the conference itself.

Later, when every participant except Pakistan attempted to disclaim responsibility for India's exclusion, the ultimate responsibility would seem to devolve upon Morocco.

Second, while private negotiations continued, the officials displayed a patent lack of tact (and some clumsiness) in keeping members of the Indian delegation away from the conference hall. A more serious aspect of this episode is the incident when the Moroccan Foreign Minister, no doubt under fatigue and pressure, made an intemperate remark to me within the hearing of some delegates, officials and journalists. The following day, an emissary was sent to apologize to me. On a later occasion, the Minister extended a personal apology to me. But, the incident, having taken place within the hearing of many people, led to a great deal of misunderstanding and was naturally exploited to the detriment of Indo-Moroccan relations.

The third and most serious consequence arose from the fact that in his closing speech to the conference, the King invoked the blessings of God on all and his protection to the Muslims in Palestine and India and wherever else they were suffering. This reference does not appear in the official text of the King's concluding speech nor has it appeared in any of the Moroccan newspapers. However, some journalists who were present in the hall, had included it in their dispatches and reports appeared in several newspapers in India and abroad. Pakistani newspapers of course had given banner headlines to this unwarranted and unjustified allegation. The Moroccan Foreign Office and the Ambassador in New Delhi denied that the King had made such a reference, but, to the best of my knowledge, no public contradiction or denial was made. The conference hurriedly wound up, without a structured final session. The hurriedly convened concluding session (without informing the Indian delegation) adopted a resolution already referred to and ended with a Press statement.

In the aftermath, the Government of India, decided to withdraw me from Rabat and the Indian Charge d'Affaires, I. S. Chadha, from Amman. I left Rabat on 4 October 1969 and was in Delhi as Ambassador "en deponibilite" – i.e. theoretically continuing as envoy to Morocco, without actually being there.

The Moroccan Ambassador to India, I must add, remained at his post throughout the period.

I was sent back in June 1970. However, soon after I was transferred as High Commissioner to Kenya and finally left Rabat on 27 September 1970.

May I add, that the incident at Rabat occasioned widespread reactions and even resentment amongst the people of India. I should consider further that it served to highlight the one-sided relationship which had hitherto existed with Arab countries particularly (and generally with Islamic countries). While they expected full support on all issues of concern to them, especially Palestine, they remained unmindful of Indian sensibilities in matters of concern to India – principally Kashmir.

In hindsight, it would appear that, over a period, the consequences of this episode have contributed to a dilution of the traditional empathy with Arab countries.

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