

Indo-Pak Relations New Voices for Peace

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As a burst of artillery fire exploded on the India-Pakistan border setting off another volley of jingoistic war rhetoric, somewhere in Delhi or in Lahore, Indians and Pakistanis were reaching out beyond governmental channels to talk of peace. Tension had peaked over a rocket hit on a mosque on January 26 followed by a hail of nightly firing over the fencing of the Jammu border, but in Delhi, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation was playing host to a high powered India-Pakistan peace dialogue.

A Peace Constituency

It was the latest in a series of 30 peace initiatives, ranging from the US brokered exclusivist Neemrana talks to the Pak-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation's dialogue set the seal of quasi-official acknowledgement of a growing peace constituency in the two countries. The foundation's dialogue was dominated by the influential elite in the revolving door of power and office, former Ministers and highflying former bureaucrats from India and Pakistan urging accommodation through Track II diplomacy.

At a time when the Pakistan Commerce Minister, Ahmed Mukhtar let fall the warning that Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status for India might be linked with its nuclear and missile policy, the former Pakistan Finance and Planning Minister, Mahbub Ul Haq in the Delhi dialogue called for a delinking of political and economic issues. Trade should not be held hostage to the Kashmir dispute.

In the shadow of the politico-bureaucratic establishments of India and Pakistan itching to go in for a new arms race, there was India's former Foreign Secretary, J.N. Dixit and the former Pakistan Foreign Minister, Sahabzada Yaqub Khan, suggesting a five percent annual cut in defence spending. At a time when competitive nuclear jingoism is at its shrillest, spurred on by the CTBT negotiations, the former spokespersons for the Indian and Pakistan establishments urged the need to make a common cause on the nuclear issue. On how that should be done, the divide was not between Indians and Pakistanis but 'statists' who want nuclear weapons and those who do not.

Breaking the Logjam

These former power brokers were echoing what the peoples of India and Pakistan have been boldly saying in Lahore and Delhi — the need to break the logjam of hostility, which threatens peace and democracy in the subcontinent. And with the political and bureaucratic system of India and Pakistan boxed into a mindset of mutual baiting and belligerence, it is people's initiatives, which must take the lead to transform the India-Pakistan relationship.

India and Pakistan no longer talk to each other. The Foreign Secretaries no longer meet for talks. One after another, the carefully built up levels of exchanges between the Defence and Home

Secretaries have all got choked up. So caught up are the diplomatic establishments of India and Pakistan in tit for tat responses, they no longer talk to each other.

The cost of this no peace no war situation is an insidious militarisation of Indian foreign policy and society as a whole. At every confrontation, war hysteria bursts forth. It is a worrying situation when the one active channel is that of soldiers talking of soldiers, that is the hot line between the two Director Generals of Military Operations.

The two heads of government, Prime Ministers P.V. Narasimha Rao and Mrs. Benazir Bhutto look through each other at international meets. Even SAARC summits have become missed opportunities. The trade track offers some hope but already the Pakistan Commerce Minister is coming under pressure to procrastinate further on granting MFN status to India by linking it with India's nuclear and missile policy. The political systems of India and Pakistan are part of the problem. Political leaders are a hostage to their own jingoistic propaganda. Any move to shift away from the politics of confrontation is attacked as betrayal.

Good-will Gestures

With statesmanship stiff led, it is Peoples' advocacy for peace and cooperation, which has to pave the way towards accommodation. And recently the peace constituency has been given a boost from the sports arena. India vs Pakistan cricket test matches had become proxy wars, a test match of nationalist credentials. It seemed inconceivable that there could ever be a joint India-Pakistan team. But today, the reality is such a joint team playing a goodwill match against Sri Lanka in Colombo as a gesture of solidarity with the beleaguered Sri Lankans after Australia and the West Indies withdrew due to the fear of a terrorist attack. It was not only a gesture of solidarity but also a signal — "that there is life outside the arms race on the subcontinent", observed an editorial writer.

It was hockey, which broke the ice with the visiting Pakistan hockey captain in India calling for more sporting links to an enthusiastic audience here. Bureaucrats soon stepped in to stymie normalisation by withholding visas for the three Pakistan members of the Asian All Star Hockey team slated to tour India.

Cultural, intellectual or sporting exchanges all hang by the slender thread of petty tit for tat diplomacy. Pakistan's famous sufi singer Nusrat Fateh Ali may hold spellbound audiences in Delhi but it all hangs on getting a visa.

The Breakthrough

What looks like emerging, as a real shot in the arm for peoples' advocacy for peace and accommodation is the business community. Trade has brokered for many normalisations, but in the case of India and Pakistan it has been more a trading of insults than goods. The bazzars of Lahore and Karachi and Delhi and Bombay may be flush with goods from across the border but the trade account does not record this flow. Bilateral trade barely accounts for 1 percent of Pakistan's exports and 0.3 percent of imports. But trade in smuggled goods is estimated to be from \$70 million to \$1billion.

Formal trade is virtually at a standstill. Since, 1995, Islamabad has been dragging its feet over the grant of Most Favoured Nation status to India despite its obligations under the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Indian goods are in effect not able to enter Pakistan except for 577 specified items. Threat to take action under the WTO has spurred on Pakistan's Commerce Minister, Ahmad Mukhtar to assure MFN will be extended to India. Mukhtar defended Pakistan's procrastinating, by blaming it on India's high tariff walls. Pakistan had de-regulated its economy far faster than India has it claimed. Pakistani businessmen were different about opening up, because there was no level playing field, the Minister said.

But the Pakistan business delegation, which came with him for the first SAARC trade fair, was enthusiastic. The visiting President of the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industries (LCC) was full of optimism about the prospect of trade taking off. What had however, to be got around was not the so-called unfair level of protection enjoyed by Indian goods but the unsettled political question of Kashmir. Pakistan's position has been that progress on cooperation can be possible only after the political issues have been sorted out.

There could be a shift in the straitjacket position sounded at the April '95 SAARC summit. But just when it looked as if Pakistan would opt out of the fast track of regional economic thrust to be ushered in by SAPTA, it has shown a renewed burst of interest in the SAARC economic process. It was Pakistan, which was lagging behind in finalising its national list of items to be preferentially traded to get SAPTA off the ground. But in November, Islamabad chose to send its Commerce Secretary to the SAARC economic committee meet after a studied absence in two earlier meetings.

In Delhi, Salman Faruqi in high profile meetings with Indian businessmen promised visa within 24 hours to bonafide businessmen. Commerce Minister, Ahmad Mukhtar followed in January with 200 Pakistan businessmen and more assurance on extending MFN status to India.

Back home, the ultra nationalists were quick to denounce it as a betrayal. Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, Chairman Kashmir Committee described it as tantamount to an act of treason with the Kashmir martyrs. But there was a counterpoint in the mainstream press that Pakistan should not let slip the opportunity to seize economic and trade leadership in the region. When the Prime Minister of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, (POK) decried the promise of MFN status for India as breaking faith with the Kashmiris, in Lahore businessmen at a seminar organised by the LCCI, extolled the bright prospects for trade with India.

It is in fact sections of the business community who are coming forward to back people's initiatives like that of the Pakistan-India People's Forum. As the co-chairperson of the Forum, former Finance Minister, Mubashir Hassan told the press in Lahore last November, "we have to ask ourselves, why are we importing cement at Rs. 175 a bag from Korea when we can get it at Rs. 100 a bag from across the border. Pakistan can produce 4 million tons of sugar but our consumption is less than 3 million. Why can't we export to India"?

Pakistani businessmen, Dr. Hasan said, why do they have to place order for heavy machinery for the railways with a third country if it could be source from India. Earlier, if Pakistan wanted to import heavy turbines, India was not invited to submit tenders. Though this could be change with the

decision by the Commerce Secretaries of the region to post notices in all the SAARC countries about tenders.

The business community could emerge as the strongest constituency for normalisation of relations. The former President of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce, S.N. Inam, a Karachi businessman, wanted to put up a trade exhibition as an adjunct to the meeting of the People's Forum in Lahore. And non-official peoples' initiatives are putting on their agenda for economic cooperation. Mahbub Ul Haq's plea at the dialogue sponsored by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation to delink politics from economics reflects this new emphasis.

The Domestic Governance

But the most insidious cost of the politics of confrontation is the undermining of the democratic process in the two polities. By whipping up the siege mentality of a national security state the coercive machinery of the state is empowered to suppress dissent-economic, ethnic or religious. Draconian and repressive actions are justified in the name of blaming outbreak of popular dissent on the ISI or RAW. Indo-Pakistan hostilities have not only militarised domestic polity but also the politics of confrontation have been fuelled by the political and bureaucratic system in control in India and Pakistan. Normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan hinges upon an improvement in the domestic governance of the two polities.

It was with this perspective in mind that the Pakistan India Peoples' Forum interlinked peace with democracy. The Forum reached out to women's groups, environmental and human rights activists, cultural activists, artists, writers, workers' representatives, scientists and intellectuals. The logic is that peace is everybody's business. The Forum is the only people's track peace initiative. Whereas the Neemrana or parlance sponsored initiatives picked out a handful of foreign policy elites, the Forum looked to representative of mass movements.

For 200 Indian and Pakistani citizens to meet in Delhi in February and have a freewheeling political dialogue on such contentious issues as Kashmir, Demilitarisation, Religious Intolerance and Governance were itself no less an achievement. It was like "writing a small piece of history," said the Co-Chairperson Nirmal Mukharji, the Former Cabinet Secretary, and Punjab Governor. For the most, Delhi was the first experience of Indians and Pakistanis to discover that the area of shared concern were far more than the areas of contention even on Kashmir. The Lahore meet was to push further the process of unpicking the layers of propaganda and prejudice. It showed up how little we know of each other. For Indians it was an eye-opener to meet with Pakistani delegates not afraid to question the costs of Pakistan's Kashmir policy and to voice that any settlement of the Kashmir dispute must be to the satisfaction of the real party—the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

For Pakistanis it was an opportunity to come face to face with Indians who upheld self-determination for the Kashmiris including the '*azadi*' option and others from India who threw into the discussion the rights of the Kashmiri pandits and the Buddhists of Ladakh.

It took more courage in Pakistan to speak out but speak out they did even in the mainstream press. While the radicalised 200 delegates from India and Pakistan in Lahore called for a bold 25% reduction in mutual force developments, in "The News", a writer, Dr. Saleem Farukh came out with

a devastating critique of what the opportunity costs of \$2.8 billion spent for 40 Mirages would be in human development terms. While the delegates were outlawing war as an option between India and Pakistan, in the mainstream press, Brig. Siddiqui (Retd.) was calculating the cost of a day's fighting – Rs. 713 crores.

It was only to be expected that the forces threatened by the people to people contacts would redouble their activity. When peace and democracy was being discussed by the peoples of the subcontinent, the Jammāt-I-Islami was holding its rally in Lahore, the centre of anti Indian jingoism. Days before at the 'Lashkar-I-Taiba' meet, women in a fit of frenzy gave their gold jewellery to spur on the Jihadis (Crusaders).

But the fact that visas for 200 Indians and Pakistanis were made available despite the diplomatic cold war made many of the participants feel that the two governments which have stopped talking to each other recognise the need to keep open private channels. Once closed, the logical step is war.

Intervention on Kashmir

It was this consciousness of the importance of this private channel of communication that inspired the Working group on Kashmir to think of some form of intervention. The Oslo process, which facilitated the Palestinian-Israeli accord, was mentioned but rejected. It would be intervention by an independent group but drawn from the peoples of India and Pakistan who are affected by the conflict. Eventually, however, the Forum balked at moving into conflict resolution. Instead a joint Indo-Pak committee was to be set up to "hold discussions with all parties including Kashmiri participants from both sides of the Line of Control to contribute to a peaceful democratic solution."

The Politics of Co-operation

Beyond the Lahore meet lie the hope of not 200 but 400 citizens from India and Pakistan meeting and discussing how to move beyond the politics of confrontation to cooperation. In the wake of the Forum's success, a number of non-official peace initiatives have followed. The proliferation of peoples' peace initiatives indicates the wide-ranging constituency, which wants peace. And it is they who will have to show the way to the political leadership to dare to show the statesmanship necessary to break the senseless Indo-Pak deadlock.