

Why is Punjab ready for peace?

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We (Indian and Pakistani Punjabis) have been able to contribute positively to the peace process at all levels. You don't know the response of these small steps in my state, where people are beating drums to welcome them. This is an expression of love for Pakistan," said the chief minister of the Indian state of Punjab, Sardar Amarinder Singh.

He was addressing a news conference along with the chief minister of Pakistani Punjab, Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, in Lahore recently. The winds of change blowing in Pakistani Punjab, once considered a bastion of the anti-Indian lobby, are now pursuing a different approach vis-à-vis its former adversary. It was always believed that it was Punjab's deep-rooted hatred against Hindus and, for that matter, India, which nurtured the hostility with India and Pakistan's military build-up since the 1950s on grounds of the threat from its eastern neighbour, suppressed democracy, human rights, and "moderate enlightenment".

The bulk of the Punjab-dominated military and bureaucratic establishment has since 1947 pursued a highly anti-Indian rhetoric and opposed people-to-people interaction between India and Pakistan, particularly people considered Mohajirs (migrants) from India. Such was the level of hatred against India because of the tragic happenings particularly in the two Punjabs and the Pakistan Army's humiliating surrender to India in December 1971 that any Punjabi having contacts with Indians was considered a traitor.

However, this approach began to change during Nawaz Sharif's time when he embarked on normalising relations with India and invited Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to visit Lahore in February 1999. Commercial and economic interests replaced parochial, political and religious considerations on Pakistan's part because Sharif visualised enormous benefits in trade, particularly in his province of Punjab. However, Sharif's road to peace with India was blocked by the Kargil conflict, and then his dismissal from power in an army coup, the failure of the Agra summit, the events following September 11 and the worsening of Indo-Pakistani relations in late 2001 and 2002.

During mid-2003, Indo-Pakistani relations gradually began to normalise, as opposed to the high level of tensions between the two countries since the failure of the Agra summit. Pakistani and Indian Punjab, the two key players in Indo-Pakistani conflicts, began to come closer with the visits of governmental officials and people representing a cross-section of society. Since the bulk of resistance and opposition to normalisation in Indo-Pakistani relations was from the two Punjabs, particularly Pakistani Punjab, it was considered impossible to change the course of history and replace the iron curtain with soft borders. Indian Punjab has for long been in favour of coming closer to Pakistani Punjab, but the Punjab-dominated military and bureaucracy in Pakistan was reluctant to give a positive re-



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sponse to gestures from Amritsar. Major impediments to peace with India remained. There was the unresolved Kashmir issue, the sacrifices given by Kashmiri Muslims to liberate their territory from Indian occupation, the irrelevance of the two-nation theory in the event of greater co-operation between the two Punjabs and the justification of the "threat perception" which Punjab has since 1947 propagated against India.

Now, as a result of the events taking place after the 12th SAARC Summit in Islamabad, January 2004 - and the meeting between President Pervez Musharraf and then-prime minister Vajpayee and the holding of the composite dialogue - the way was paved for inter Punjab dialogue for greater cultural, economic and political co-operation.

If Punjab is transforming its policy vis-a-vis India and no longer considers interaction with Indian Punjab unpatriotic, then it should not raise objections if people from the smaller minority provinces of Pakistan also want to mend fences with India

The visit of the chief minister of Indian Punjab, and the warm welcome that he received in Lahore, Islamabad and other places that he visited in Pakistani Punjab, underlines the vitality and sustenance of one culture and language between the two Punjabs. The chief minister of Pakistani Punjab has been quite receptive to the ideas of his Indian counterpart for a soft border between the two Punjabs, which the Punjabi elite cannot deny in the present circumstances. It is, after all, language, culture a common past and prospects for a better future that tend to shape policies for unification of divided regions. Religion, which divided Punjab in 1947, is not considered to be relevant to political realism.

Steps to run the bus service between Lahore and Amritsar, permitting ten buses to ply in order to take Indian Sikhs to Punjab to celebrate Baisakhi, and greater economic cooperation between the two Punjabs contradict the traditional line taken by the Punjab-dominated Pakistani establishment against normalisation with India without the "resolution of the Kashmir dispute in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolutions." Now, interaction between the two Punjabs is not considered a security risk or contrary to the national interests of Pakistan but is within the priorities of Islamabad and Lahore.

Of course, there is no harm in pursuing the

Indo-Pakistani normalisation process, but what about almost six decades of anti-Indian rhetoric that the Pakistani rulers followed? The truth is, the bulk of Kashmir has not become part of Pakistan and it is still under Indian control. The Indian security forces still have a massive deployment in Jammu and Kashmir and are targeting Kashmiri groups fighting for their right of self-determination.

So what has changed Punjab's mindset or heart vis-a-vis India, given that New Delhi has not changed its Kashmir policy, that it is pursuing a massive armament program and has not given up its power ambitions in South Asia?

Pakistani Punjab's change of heart vis-a-vis India has much to do with the changed regional and global situation. The world is not interested in Pakistan's rhetoric on Kashmir and wants the two countries to live like normal neighbours. Pakistan's military establishment seems to have come to the conclusion that a strong economy will benefit not only the country but also its corporate interests. Talk of securing Kashmir has only resulted in wars and confrontation and jeopardised the military's interests in the area of governance. Peace with India will enable the military to focus on domestic affairs and multiply its corporate interests.

But if Punjab has become ready for peace with India by allowing greater interaction with the Indian part of Punjab, then it should also allow the people of Sindh to interact with their brothers and sisters in Rajasthan, the Pushtuns in the North-Western Frontier Province to have soft borders with their counterparts living in Afghanistan and the Baloch to meet with their fellows in Iranian Balochistan. Most important, the Punjab-dominated military and bureaucratic establishment should stop suspecting the loyalty of migrants from India and refrain from creating hurdles in issuing visas for Urdu-speaking Indians interested in visiting Pakistan. The teachers of Sindh's universities, particularly those in Karachi, should not be discouraged from visiting India and the condition of seeking clearance from security agencies for their visit to India should be withdrawn immediately.

Steps taken by Islamabad to prevent the interaction of the people of Sindh with India are unreasonable because no such conditions exist as far as Punjab is concerned. Islamabad and Lahore should also not create hurdles in the re-opening of the Khokhrapar-Munaboia railway link, the Karachi-Mumbai ferry, and cultural and trade relations between Sindh and Rajasthan.

The motive for Punjab's readiness for peace with India must not be just to attain economic and commercial benefits and promote cultural ties with Indian Punjab; it should take the interest of the whole of Pakistan into consideration. If Punjab is transforming its policy vis-a-vis India and no longer considers interaction with Indian Punjab unpatriotic, then it should not raise objections if people from the smaller minority provinces of Pakistan also want to mend fences with India.

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