

The first step!

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"A journey of thousand miles begins with a single step." —Chinese Communist Party leader, Chairman, Mao Tse Tung

The current debate going on in Pakistan and also in India about gaps in the normalisation process has one fundamental aspect: both sides are confused about who will take the first step. New Delhi and Islamabad are aware of the fact that 56 years of confrontation tend to expose the myths expressed by the ruling elite of the two countries justifying the enemy images. It is also quite clear in the on going debate on bettering Indo-Pak ties that the normalisation process is very difficult. That neither side is willing to give substantial concessions to each other to the extent that the Kashmir issue is resolved in an amicable manner. Vajpayee's hand of friendship has been reciprocated by Pakistan but four months have passed since his initiative and one does not see the breaking of ice. Both sides are not ready to take the first step and are blaming each other of complicating matters in the normalisation process.

Three important events, which have taken place in the last one month, should have kept the momentum alive in either holding at least foreign secretaries talks but unfortunately, valuable opportunities have been lost. First, the resumption of Lahore-Delhi bus service after an interlude of 18 months is a major positive sign in Indo-Pak relations. It was hoped that with the resumption of the bus service, other communication links like train and air would also re-start resulting into some form of normalcy between the two countries. India has blamed Pakistan of not being serious in resuming over flights and direct air links or increasing the number of buses in the Lahore-Delhi route. New Delhi has also made it clear that it cannot consider resuming Samjhota Express (train service) unless there is an agreement on the two issues. It is strange that instead of processing the revival of people-to-people interaction, the policy-makers from the two sides are still talking in terms of personal ego and interest. **Second**, the visit of the Ulema delegation from Pakistan led by the JUI Chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman to India and his meetings with the cross section of people in that country was a positive sign. A lot of misunderstanding, which existed in India about the role of clergy in Pakistan, particularly about the religious parties and the so-called Jihadi elements, has been cleared to some extent. Similarly, the Ulema delegation also benefited from their interaction with different sorts of people in India and their perception about their neighbour which was influenced by negative factors may have changed for the better.

What is required after the successful visit of the Ulema delegation to India is sustaining the momentum, which has been created in the two countries as a result of that event. Religious leaders from India, belonging to different faiths, should visit Pakistan and share with their neighbour issues of mutual interest and ways of removing the bottlenecks in the normalisation process. The crux of Indo-Pak animosity is still religion and the manner in which the sub-continent was partitioned in 1947 resulting into the outbreak of shameful Hindu-Muslim riots is an important factor in the psyche of the people of the two countries. Even now, the legacy of these riots haunts the



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minds of Indians and Pakistanis who only hope that the new generation in the two countries is not a victim of religious hatred and paranoia. Will religious biases among Hindus and Muslims could be replaced with religious tolerance and respect? How a sense of religious cooperation and goodwill can be established between the people of India and Pakistan and what are the problems in this regard?

Third, the visit of a parliamentary delegation composed of members from different political parties to Pakistan to attend a conference of South Asia Media Association (SAFMA) in Islamabad has been a very pleasant event in Indo-Pak relations. Such a visit has given an impetus to Track-II diplomacy and clearing many doubts and misunder-

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standing among the minds of members of delegation about Pakistan. Their interviews and interaction with the Pakistani side tend to generate a lot of interest in this country about the Indian mindset. Four things, which dominated the discourse between Indian and Pakistani side on the occasion of SAFMA conference and activities after that event, proved the wish and desire on the part of both sides to normalise things on the basis of give and take.

First, there was a relative consensus among the Indians and Pakistanis that it is high time the two neighbours take serious measures to normalise relations, which have been abnormal since 1947. **Second**, on the Kashmir dispute, even the Indian side accepted the reality that there is a need to resolve that issue in such a manner that the aspirations and wishes of Pakistan and Kashmiris are also taken care of. The attitude of the Indian delegation on Kashmir was not uncompromising or hostile and it stressed on talking on that issue. **Third**, the Pakistan side also recognised the fact that despite the centrality of the Kashmir issue in the Indo-Pak

normalisation process, there is a need for holding talks on improving relations in other areas like trade, travel, culture and sports. Earlier, both sides had followed a rigid posture as New Delhi was insisting on ending "cross border terrorism" from the side of Pakistan and Pakistan was arguing that without the settlement of the Kashmir dispute nothing can be done to achieve a breakthrough in Indo-Pak ties. Now, the two sides, also at the Track-I level, have reached a relative consensus that there is a need to talk on all matters including Kashmir. **Fourth**, the two sides have realised the importance and significance of media, both print and electronic in creating trust and confidence among the people of India and Pakistan for unleashing the normalisation process. Of course, it has been the media, which can either inflame or diffuse the situation. On the occasion of the SAFMA conference, moments of affinity were shared by the Indian and Pakistani delegations and such things were passed on by the media to the viewers. In most cases, both Indian and Pakistani participants agreed that not much time is left and if the present opportunity to normalise relations is lost then one should be prepared for the worst eventuality.

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali have said many times that if India takes one-step for building the environment of trust and confidence, their country will take two steps. But the question is who will take the first step and if the first step is taken, it will not lead to a backward step? If Pakistan takes the first step for a meaningful breakthrough in relations with India and if that step is not reciprocated by India, then the situation may be quite embarrassing for Islamabad. Same is true in case of India. If New Delhi takes the first step and does not get positive response from Pakistan, the outcome will be counter productive and the hard line elements in the Indian establishment will ask their government to forget about taking any more initiative. The question is how to prevent such a situation in future because past experience shows that both India and Pakistan have several complains against each other of improper reciprocity. Whether it is the question of Pakistan's offer to address New Delhi's concern about "cross border terrorism" or India's offer to Islamabad to talk on the Kashmir dispute, in both cases, there is the problem of non-reciprocity. On other matters like nuclear risk reduction, water issue, trade, travel and visa restrictions, there is a history of bitterness between India and Pakistan that either side has followed a policy of non-reciprocity.

In order to deal with the predicament of reciprocity and non-reciprocity in Indo-Pak relations, it is essential that the two sides should follow a non-egoistic approach and consider the interest of the people of India and Pakistan into consideration rather than the interest of their respective constituencies. With a broad approach and a policy of wisdom, it will be possible for the two sides to take the first step together followed by other steps, both small and big, resulting into the gradual thawing of their relations. "A journey of thousand miles begins with a single step" is very much valid in case of Indo-Pak relations provided such a step is in the right direction and leads to a better environment for the people of the two countries.