[**The dying dove**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1746177/the-dying-dove)

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SEVENTY-SIX years is a long time to harbour a grudge. There are parallels across the globe, eg, PRC over Taiwan; Argentina over the Falkland Islands; the Palestinians over Israel.

Between India and Pakistan, the wound left open by the British has continued to fester since 1947, despite ministrations by well-meaning politicians, diplomats and peaceniks. War has proved no panacea, pe­­ace elusive. The dove of peace, exhausted, mission unaccomplished, is dying of old age.

At no time have these two states come nearer peace than during the stewardship of the late Satinder K. Lambah, India’s representative to Islamabad as deputy high commissioner (1978-81), as high commissioner (1992-95), and more significantly as the special envoy of PM Manmohan Singh (2005-14). He died in June 2022.

His posthumous memoirs In Pursuit of Pe­­ace: India-Pakistan Relations under Six Pri­me Ministers (2023)will never be disseminated in Pakistan, unless circumstances change. That is more than a pity: it is a tragedy. Three generations of Indians and Pakistanis who have known wars need to know how dangerously close they came to peace.

War has proved no panacea.

Many Indian diplomats have written on Indo-Pak relations, amongst them Kuldip Nayar’s Distant Neighbours, Mani Shankar Aiyar’s Pakistan Papers, and J.N. Dixit’s India-Pakistan in War and Peace. None can match Shri Lambah’s credentials.

Like 19th-century French diplomat Charles Talleyrand who served his country during the French Revolution, under Napoleon, the Bourbons and finally Orléans royalty, Lambah served under six successive Indian PMs. His access to them varied but he enjoyed their confidence without betraying their trust.

Lambah defines Indo-Pak relations as “not a diplomatic choice [but] a political one. Given the deep weight of public opinion and sentiment attached to India-Pakistan relations in both countries, there appears to be little option but for the two countries to work towards calculated and intuitive decisions”. He devoted the latter part of his career towards this end.

His book is a muster of detailed notes he kept, sharply etched biographical sketches of prominent Pakistanis both in khaki and mufti, and informed insights into the attitudes of the Indian leadership towards Pakistan.

He recalls the conciliatory remarks made by Narasimha Rao as external affairs minister to Pakistani businessmen at Karachi in 1981: “It is not unusual to find next door neighbours not being on talking terms for a while, but neighbourliness prevails in the end.” And Rao’s later taunt to Pakistan on Aug 15, 1994 (made prescient by PM Modi’s subsequent action revoking Article 370): “With you, without you, despite you, Kashmir will remain an integral part of India.”

A piquant recollection amongst numerous others in the book is about the meeting in 1988 between PM Benazir Bhutto and PM Rajiv Gandhi’s envoy Ronen Sen: “At the outset, she signalled that the meeting room was likely to be bugged and that sensitive issues would be communicated by handwritten exchanges on a notepad passed back and forth while discussions for the record could continue simultaneously.”

Lambah lauds the courageous efforts made by PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee during his bus yatra to Lahore in 1999, the summit at Agra in 2001, his visit to Islamabad in 2004, and his conviction recorded at the Minar-i-Pakistan that “a stable and prosperous Pakistan is in India’s favour”.

The strength of Shri Lambah’s book is his account of the back-channel efforts he made as PM Singh’s envoy with Pakistani counterparts, particularly Tariq Aziz (Gen Musharraf’s confidant). They spr­e­­ad over nine years — 2005-2014. During this period, Lambah calculated that he met Sin­g­­h for guidance 68 times and his Pakistani interlocutors for resolution 27 times.

Gradually, they inched across the no-man’s land between Musharraf’s four-point plan and Manmohan Singh’s suggestion of “economic integration through soft borders”. An agreement appeared within grasp, and then like a mirage, it vanished.

Indo-Pak peace has proved elusive because the leadership on both sides are ringed, like cormorants. They carry a constriction that inhibits ingesting a solution — political on India’s side and military on ours. An unspoken question, however, remains. While history knows what happened to the politicians who should have taken decisions and couldn’t, where today are those unseen forces which prevented them from doing so?

Shri Lambah concludes with this regret: “The prospects for dialogue, engagement and a broader peace process have never see­med so distant [because] we see each other principally through the prism of religion.”

Churchill’s advice to the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War could guide the leadership of our countries: “Bridge the gulf between the two worlds, so that each can live their life, if not in friendship at least without [hatred].”

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