

# 'People-to-people' diplomacy

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The visiting Indian parliamentarians provided some of us, not normally in the loop of Track-II, an opportunity to see what the so-called people-to-people contact was all about. And, frankly, there was little to commend it in terms of substantive steps forward to move in the direction of real peace. The first major characteristic of such exchanges seems to be an effort to "preach to the converted"! Those who do not fall in line are given a variety of labels - I was told I belonged to the "Majid Nizami group", whatever that may mean but I know it will be of no comfort to Mr Nizami!

More disturbing is the other dominating feature regarding this "people-to-people" exercise: the agenda is by and large defined by the Indians. Also, at least in the case of the parliamentarians, it was clear that they had been briefed by their government and were in Pakistan to project a certain Indian viewpoint! Where their basic premises were challenged, they became aggressive and showed a total lack of ability to accept the alternative perspective.

For instance, it is now common place to hear from supporters of "Track II" and "people-to-people" lobbyists that Pakistanis and Indians are culturally one - speaking the same language and so on. This is a myth. There may be cultural affiliations between the elite of Lahore and Delhi, but which common language exists otherwise between South Indians, West Bengal Indians, and so on and Pakistanis? The gap between spoken Urdu and Hindi is also widening with much of the Hindi TV news coming from Delhi being incomprehensible to many Pakistanis. Also, watching Indian movies or listening to Indian music does not create a common cultural affinity. After all, many are passionate devotees of Western music and literature also. Even the Bengalis of East Pakistan could not overcome their politically independent identity to seek cultural one-ness with the West Bengalis of India by merging in with that Indian state instead of struggling for and creating an independent state of Bangladesh.

Finally, for the generation born after 1947, there is no familial bonding with British India either - except for those with families in India or those who migrated from what have become Indian provinces. All in all, just as the Pashtun feels more culturally in tune to Afghanistan, and Balochs may feel linkages to neighbouring Iran, so some in northern India and Pakistani Punjab may feel a cultural bonding but one can hardly describe it as a cultural one-ness with India given the diversity of both countries - which were created at the same time in August 1947 from British India.

Linked to this myth of cultural one-ness, is the absurdity of the notion of India and Pakistan being likened to a big brother and small brother! Somehow the sense of family and brotherhood hardly defines the Pakistan-India relationship. A more realistic approach would be to see each other as neighbouring states, in the same way that Iran and Afghanistan are neighbours of Pakistan - but neighbours locked in a conflictual situation.

The point of raising the absurdity of the emotive approach to peace is that it will not get very far - and, in fact, has not gotten very far. A far better approach would be to begin with the premise that Pakistan and India are like two neighbouring states anywhere and are locked in a debilitating conflictual relationship which needs to be worked out through lowering of tensions and resolution of prevailing conflicts - especially core issues. But telling that to the Indians seems to traumatise them - or at least it traumatised the parliamentarians who were simply not prepared to accept that the cultural bonding may not exist between the majority of Pakistanis and Indians.

Another interesting feature of such contact groups from both sides seems to be that they spend most of their time stating self-serving platitudes and dismissing the relevance of the governments of both states - but especially the Pakistani government, since the Pakistanis in these groups, by and large, tend to accept the Indian agenda and lead. But the more relevant point here is that such an approach serves no positive purpose - barring satiating internal beliefs. After all, if peace is to come, it is the governments and states on both sides that will have to be made to move on this count.

That is why, for a few minutes it was very heartening to hear the leader of the Indian parliamentary group declare that one should move towards substantive proposals to evaluate "where do we go from here". However, on being presented with substantive proposals, no one on the Indian side was prepared to discuss these or give alternative proposals - the pretext being that "we do not have the mandate to discuss such proposals." As if any mandate is needed when people in their individual capacities suggest some proposals for conflict resolution or lowering of tensions.

So what were these proposals? Well, they were related to Kashmir since the Indians were trying to pass on the message that Kashmir was too controversial an issue and should be put aside while other facets of cooperation were explored. They had to be reminded that from 1972 (post-Simla) till 1989 Pakistan

had forgotten all about Kashmir but Indian leadership failed to use this window of opportunity to improve their relations with Pakistan as well as be responsive to the Kashmiri people in Occupied Kashmir.

It is also strange how Indians have a convenient amnesia over the history of partition - especially the part relating to the Princely States within British India. The formula whereby the Rulers of these states were to decide their future was readily accepted by India and implemented by force in the case of Hyderabad (where the Muslim Ruler had opted for independence) and Junagadh (where the Muslim ruler had opted for Pakistan). India grabbed the two states militarily on the grounds of geographical contiguity and Hindu majority populations of both the states. Only in the case of Kashmir no principles were followed.

The Indians also either deliberately choose to ignore, or are really unaware of, President Musharraf's four-point proposal for improvement of relations, including a most flexible approach to Kashmir - that is, both sides putting aside their traditional positions on Kashmir and seeking a solution through dialogue and compromise.

Anyhow, it was proposed to the Indian parliamentarians that the following steps could be taken to move towards lowering of tensions between the two states:

- \* First, start of the composite dialogue, including on Kashmir.

- \* Second, as a CBM, the Indian forces going back to the barracks in Indian Occupied Kashmir and the Mujahideen declaring a ceasefire.

- \* Restoration of the LoC that both Pakistan and India agreed to at Simla in 1972 - since the status quo has been destroyed by Indian incursions into Siachin, Chor Bat La and the Qamar Sector across the 1972 LoC.

- \* International monitoring of the LoC.

- \* Requesting the UN to establish a register of Kashmiris so that there is a record of who would be allowed to exercise the right of self-determination at a future date - in whatever fashion.

The Indians were simply not prepared to even discuss any of these proposals for fear of giving even a personal viewpoint. When the issue was raised about how even at the people-to-people level substantive action can be taken to improve mutual understanding, and a proposal-cum-offer was put forward inviting an Indian scholar to come to the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad as the ISSI's guest and do a joint research paper with a scholar from the Institute, there was an embarrassed silence and the offer was sidetracked.

All this leads one to conclude that, at least on the part of the Indians, all these people-to-people delegations are not geared for moving in a substantive direction in terms of peace. Instead, the effort is simply to play on the Pakistanis' political and emotive vulnerabilities and try and put the whole onus of the conflictual environment prevailing in the subcontinent on Pakistan! The parliamentarians even had the audacity to complain that the foreign minister - who was in town for a day when they came - could not find time to meet them! This is despite the fact that Pakistan gave official acknowledgment to them by having the Acting President host a dinner for them (but that too was not to their satisfaction - since they felt he should have given a public statement also and spent more time with them!) Earlier, in Lahore, the Speaker of the Punjab Assembly had also hosted a dinner for them.

In contrast, when our parliamentarians visited India, there was a deliberate policy at the official level to give them no access or acknowledgement. And while the Pakistani delegation had three government party members, the Indian delegation had no BJP representation - and no woman either!

But then it is clear that the Indians feel they can ride roughshod over the Pakistanis. Perhaps the fault lies partly with us also, since many on our side of the people-to-people movement are prepared to accept the Indian agenda and framework. Worse still, the over-enthusiastic amongst us, continue to give proposals on sensitive issues which effectively support the official Indian positions. For instance, on Kashmir, there are those who continue to insist that exchanges take place across the LoC (of groups like the parliamentarians) with passport check posts and so on along the LoC. The advocates of such an approach also declare their lack of respect for "legalities, international norms", etc. But it is precisely these that define international relations and such proposals bolster the Indian view that the LoC should become the international border between Pakistan and India.

Perhaps the clearest message to come through from the Indian parliamentarians was their clear distinction between government and state. So none of them would say or do anything to undermine the latter despite their differences with the former. This is a lesson our political elite have yet to imbibe.

The views expressed by the writer are her own