

# A journey towards tomorrow

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Pak-P. Relations  
Dance  
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WHAT began at the Wagah border as a mere visit to Pakistan turned into an explosion of goodwill and friendship. We, the nine Indian parliamentarians who travelled to Pakistan a few days ago, were swept off our feet by love and affection showered upon us at Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi.

It was almost a people's war against the age-old prejudice and hatred against India. They were prepared to jettison the baggage of hostility so as to live as good neighbours in peace. They wanted to reach out to people in India.

But if the message from our side is that no-give-and-take policy is required or some form of sabre-rattling, the window of opportunity opened by Prime Minister Vajpayee's initiative could shut for many more decades to come. There is need for people on both sides to assert themselves and denounce those whose rhetoric is coming in the way of peace.

The highest point of our nine-day visit was the reception by the Jamaat-i-Islami that announced publicly that they wanted to befriend India. It was their first reception to any Indian delegation since the establishment of Pakistan. They assured us that they would like to solve all problems, including Kashmir, through dialogue. Their wish was to bury the hatchet once and for all.

One commentator from Pakistan has e-mailed me a message: "You have achieved the impossible. Of all the people Liaquat Baloch of the Jamaat-i-Islami is ecstatic on the private channels of Pakistan about the reception they hosted."

Fazlur Rehman, chief of the amalgam of six religious parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), in the Pakistan National Assembly, added another dimension. He said: "Track Two is all right. But without Track One, the fauj (the army), anything can be stymied. We should ponder over that." A top leader whispered to me that the core problem was not Kashmir but the corps commanders.

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We found them pragmatic and accommodative. Retired chief justice Nasim Hassan Shah, who was in the chair, said that he was once a staunch supporter of right of self-determination but now his views had changed. He said it was wrong to think that Indians were "our enemies."

One proposal that emerged at the meeting was that India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal should become a single economic unit like the European Union to enable people and goods move without restriction.

The Lahore Chamber of Commerce also welcomed the proposal. They estimated that the two countries lost revenues worth nearly six billion dollars (Rs 3,000 crore) annually because of illegal trade through Dubai or Singapore. They were keen to sell in Indian markets. They wanted joint ventures.

Asked why Pakistan had not extended the MFN status to India when the latter did it nearly 10 years ago, we got no satisfactory answer. Some said that the reciprocal step got entangled in Pakistan's politics.

Economic ties could be the sinews of a firm relationship. If we were to allow Pakistan sell its products in India without any impost — a suggestion I made 30 years ago — the Pakistanis would develop a vested interest in our progress.

It was Islamabad where we met Sherry Rehman and M.P. Bhandara, who were sparing no effort for narrowing the distance between the two countries. Both sides needed scores of Sherrys and Bhandaras to develop a meaningful understanding.

Protocol-wise, the Pakistan government was correct. The acting President of Pakistan gave a dinner in our honour. The Speaker of the Punjab Assembly too hosted a dinner at the chamber. The information minister of Sindh held a reception. But the federal government remained distant.

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Our travel through Pakistan began at the Wagah border itself. Asma Jehangir, a byword for human rights, and Dr Mubashir Hasan, who has done pioneering work in the field of India-Pakistan relations, were among the scores of people who welcomed us. We heard the refrain of a familiar song: "We shall overcome (*Hum honge kamiyaab*)."

Our first halt was Lahore. Pawan Bansal, a Congress MP in the team, remarked that every face reminded him of a face he had seen in India before. It was his maiden visit to Pakistan. Shahid Siddiqui, general secretary of the Samajwadi Party, who had been to Pakistan before, said that he did not feel he had come to a different country — something he felt in Bangladesh and Nepal.

Senior retired military officers have constituted in Lahore a group, the India-Pakistan Soldiers Initiative for Peace. At the dinner they hosted — some 50 top brass were present — the chairman admitted that the wars both countries had waged were pointless. It was time we forgot the past and began a new chapter of peace and harmony. Hostilities had not solved any problem; friendship would.

We perceived a similar desire for a roundtable discussion with the writers, columnists, retired judges and civil servants. Their reputation was that of hardliners.

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Press Club, which had never kowtowed to the martial law administrators, was as lively as ever. This is where a journalist asked us point-blank about Gujarat. None of us had any defence and we admitted that it was a shame for a secular polity.

Kashmir was raised practically at every meeting. No specific solution was offered. There was a demand to settle it. My argument that India would not accept any solution on the basis of religion was attacked by a couple of newspapers. But people on the whole tended to agree with me. We should start talks on Kashmir after ensuring that other problems like trade and tourism would not be held as hostage to the main problem. The majority of the people supported this approach.

At many places we pointed out that talks would have little meaning if cross-border terrorism continued. People generally agreed. But two poets in Islamabad resented even our raising the point. They, like some others in Pakistan, could not fathom the resentment cross-border terrorism was creating throughout India and jeopardizing the process of normalization.

I am convinced that people-to-people contact is the answer to the wall of suspicion and distrust that has been built up between