

Friendly Exchanges and People-to-People Contact Between Pakistan and India: Imperatives and Impediments

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Abstract

In recognition of the crucial role of people-to-people contact through friendly exchanges and cultural relations for the promotion of peace and normalisation, Pakistan and India agreed to include these aspects as one of the eight subjects for the Composite Dialogue and Peace Process initiated in 2004. Since then, the two countries have been able to make impressive progress in this area, leading to an expansion in people-to-people contacts through the exchange of visits by performing artists, poets, lawyers, students, journalists, parliamentarians, jurists, businessmen and writers. The enhanced level of people-to-people contact has also made important contribution to the relaxation in the visa regime, strengthening of peace constituencies in both the countries, the promotion of physical connectivity and enhancement of bilateral trade. However, much more can and should be done in this direction, as progress in this area directly contributes to the narrowing down of the trust deficit and removal of misperceptions in the psyche of the people of Pakistan and India. These objectives are not only essential for the achievement of durable peace through result-oriented and productive talks to which both countries are committed under the peace process, but will serve the long-term national security interests of Pakistan, as friendly exchanges and cultural relations directly contribute to the promotion of stability and prosperity in the South Asian region. This paper, while taking stock of the gains already made by Pakistan and India during the last ten years of bilateral talks under the peace process, discusses the obstacles that impede further progress in this area, and makes an attempt to identify further areas for cooperation. The paper concludes that friendly

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Strategic Studies

exchanges cannot be fully developed without simultaneously trying to resolve the core issues.

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Introduction

On April 18, 2003, the former prime minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in a statement in Srinagar agreed to a focused dialogue for the resolution of bilateral disputes between Pakistan and India, including the issue of Jammu and Kashmir, in order to work for the normalisation of relations and promotion of cooperation between the two countries. Pakistan, which had been asking for such a dialogue for the past several months, welcomed the Indian premier's statement. Mir Zafarullah Jamali, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, proposed to immediately open talks, including those on the promotion of people-to-people contacts and friendly exchanges.

When the two countries agreed to resume bilateral talks under the composite dialogue process in early 2004, friendly exchanges and measures to promote people-to-people contacts were included in the eight-point agenda for these talks. In the four rounds of composite dialogue between 2004 and 2008, the discussions at various levels led to an unprecedented expansion of people-to-people contacts between the two neighbours, involving the exchange of visits by members of the civil society, professional groups, students, journalists, lawyers, businessmen, parliamentarians, jurists, and artists.

The increase in friendly exchanges and growth of people-to-people contacts has narrowed the communication gap between the two countries, and thus helped remove some of the misperceptions, but the process is still heavily constrained because of the restrictive travel regime. A recent decision by the Government of India (GOI) to exclude Pakistan from the list of 180 countries enjoying the facility of visa-on-arrival at the Indian

*Friendly Exchanges and People-to-People Contact Between Pakistan and India:
Imperatives and Impediments*

airports can be cited as an example. Similarly, denial of the extension of visa to two Islamabad-based Indian journalists is an indication of existing obstacles.

This paper argues that the dispositions of Pakistan and India towards each other are being influenced by regional trends for close interaction between the people for trade, business, and tourism, as well as commercial, economic and cultural cooperation.

The opening of routes for travel and trade across the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir, the promotion of physical connectivity between East Punjab and West Punjab, and the revival of Munnabao-Khokrapar rail link between Sindh and Rajasthan are prominent examples of this phenomenon. Taking these developments as the baseline, the paper further argues that the governments in Islamabad and New Delhi would come under increasing pressure to allow increased people-to-people contacts and friendly exchanges. These would ideally push the governments on both sides to further promote physical connectivity and liberalise the present restrictive visa regime. The paper thus focuses on imperatives for enhanced people-to-people contact and friendly exchanges, and would also identify the impediments that tend to arrest forward movement in this direction.

Background

Pakistan and India started interacting with each other through inter-governmental agreements immediately after the partition. Historically, the issues that constituted the bedrock for these interactions were: mass exodus of population, maintaining peace on borders, bilateral trade, sharing of waters, protection of the rights of minorities, the maintenance of places of worship, supply of electricity from India to Pakistan, and establishment of communication, postal and shipping services for the convenience of divided families and travellers, as well as cultural-and-sports-related exchanges. These links, however, were disrupted during the 1965 war.

Strategic Studies

Before the 1965 war, a lot of cultural interaction took place between the two countries owing to a relaxed visa regime. Even travelling across the Ceasefire Line between the Indian-held Kashmir and Azad Jammu and Kashmir was quite easy. The 1965 war transformed the image of India into that of an enemy state, stunting cultural exchanges including books, newspapers, films, joint *mushairas* and sports-related exchanges, a setback from which the two countries never fully recovered.

The Tashkent Declaration, signed between the two countries on January 10, 1966 in the wake of the 1965 war, sought to restore these links to some extent by providing the “measures to implement all the existing agreements.” This declaration also provided for the promotion of a friendly relationship between the two countries and the restoration of economic and trade relations and communication, as well as cultural exchanges.¹ The Simla Agreement signed between Pakistan and India subsequently on July 2, 1972 contained more elaborate provisions for the promotion of friendly relations. For instance, in Paragraph 2 of the agreement, the two sides pledged to prevent hostile propaganda, and encourage and disseminate information that would promote friendly relations. Under the clauses (II) and (V) of Paragraph 3, the two countries also pledged to take appropriate measures to promote travel facilities, and exchanges in the fields of science and culture.² It was pursuant to the Simla Agreement that a rail service, the *Samjhota* Express, was initiated in July 1976 between the two border cities of Pakistan and India, namely Lahore and Amritsar. Earlier, Pakistan and India were connected via railroad by another train service known as the Thar Express, which ran between the Hyderabad city of Pakistan and Ahmadabad (Gujrat) in India. However, it was discontinued in 1965 due to the war. It was revived in 2006 and now operates once a week between Munnabao and Khokhrapar.

Pakistan and India signed an agreement on the maintenance of places of religious worship on August 14, 1953. Both countries house places of religious worship and holy shrines sacred to their religious communities and minorities. Under this agreement, the governments committed to providing increased facilities to the people visiting these sacred sites.³ Over the years, the agreement greatly facilitated the pilgrims from both sides and helped promote people-to-people contact.

*Friendly Exchanges and People-to-People Contact Between Pakistan and India:
Imperatives and Impediments*

On May 17, 1955, Pakistan and India signed another agreement, known as the **Pant-Mirza Agreement to Prevent Border Incidents and Protect Places of Worship**. This agreement also provided for increased facilities and assistance to pilgrims visiting the places of religious worship from both sides, either as individual pilgrims or as groups. The agreement also made recommendations to the two countries to provide “free and liberal grant of travel facilities to the pilgrims.”⁴

Earlier, on April 9, 1955, Pakistan and India had signed an agreement to liberalise travel facilities. **The Pant-Mirza Agreement, while referring to this agreement, recommended the introduction of a revised passport and liberal visa regime.**

Pakistan-India Cultural Agreement 1988

The **cultural agreement signed on December 31, 1988** is the main framework for **cultural cooperation and friendly exchanges** and for the promotion of people-to-people contact. According to Article 1 of the Agreement, the governments of Pakistan and India pledged to **facilitate and encourage cooperation in the fields of art, culture, archaeology, education, mass media, and information and sport in order to contribute towards a better knowledge of their respective cultures and activities in these fields**. The agreement also provided for the **establishment of Cultural Centers in each country**, the details of which were to be worked out later. The agreement called for the reciprocal visits of academicians, education administrators, professors and experts for delivering lectures, as well as conducting study tours and special courses. Under this agreement, the two governments also allowed reciprocal visits of representatives of educational, library, artistic, sports, and journalists’ associations, as well as their participation in conferences, symposia and seminars. The agreement encouraged exchanges in the fields of art and culture; mass media such as radio and television and documentaries; education, sports and archaeology; and books, periodicals, and educational, cultural and sports publications. There were also provisions for exchanges between artists, poets, writers and musicians, art exhibitions, and participation in international film festivals. Under this agreement, the governments of

Pakistan and India also pledged to encourage visits of sports teams between the two countries. The 1988 cultural agreement provided for all possible measures for ensuring that textbooks prescribed for their educational institutions, particularly those relating to history and geography, did not contain any misrepresentation of facts about each other. The agreement also provided for an India-Pakistan Joint Commission that would formulate cultural and educational exchange programmes proposed in line with the agreement.⁵

Cultural and Friendly Exchanges, People-to-People Contact and Peace Process (2004-2008)

The former prime minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited Islamabad to attend the 12th SAARC Summit in January 2004. A meeting between him and Pakistan's former president Pervez Musharraf was held on the sidelines of the Summit. This resulted in a Joint Statement issued on January 6, 2004, under which the two leaders announced the resumption of bilateral talks in order to find solutions to disputes and promote normalisation of relations through friendly exchanges and people-to-people contact under the **Composite Dialogue and Peace Process**. Subsequently, the structured talks covered eight subjects or baskets, which included these two subjects.

The talks on friendly exchanges and people-to-people contacts were held in New Delhi on 3-4 August 2004. The representatives of the two ministries of culture discussed wide-ranging proposals for cooperation in the fields of art, culture, archaeology, education, science and technology, youth affairs and sports, the media and tourism. Although these discussions did not produce dramatic results, the interaction between the two sides on this subject was encouraging. The participants, for instance, were able to reach an agreement on addressing humanitarian issues concerning civilian prisoners and fishermen on the two sides.

There was also an agreement to increase the number of pilgrims and places of religious importance for the citizens of both countries. The two sides agreed that the decisions made during the talks would be implemented through mutual coordination.⁶

*Friendly Exchanges and People-to-People Contact Between Pakistan and India:
Imperatives and Impediments*

The four rounds of Composite Dialogue held from 2004 to 2008 resulted in a remarkable growth of friendly exchanges and people-to-people contact. A large number of civil society members, artists, poets, musicians, journalists, sportspersons, pilgrims, lawyers, students, judges, and parliamentarians have undertaken visits. The progress in this area, in fact, has outperformed developments in the other areas, especially that of dispute resolution. Being mindful of the fact that the growth of friendly exchanges and people-to-people contacts contributes to relaxation of tension and promotion of trust, the two countries strove hard to agree on measures that could further facilitate interaction.

New Rail/Road Connections

Before the start of the Composite Dialogue and Peace Process between Pakistan and India in 2004, the two countries were connected through air, one rail link and one road route. Lahore and Karachi were connected to New Delhi and Bombay (now Mumbai), while *Samjhota Express* ran a train between Lahore and Amritsar. In 1999, a bus service between Lahore and New Delhi was inaugurated. Fortunately, the four years of peace talks (2004-2008) between Pakistan and India witnessed the opening of more land routes - two across the international border between the two Punjabs, Lahore-Amritsar, and Amritsar-Nankana Sahib.

In April 2005, a bus service between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar was inaugurated to enable the members of divided families living across the Line of Control (LoC) to visit one another. Another land route opened between Rawalakot and Poonch across the LoC in 2008 for trade between the two parts of Kashmir Valley. There were also proposals to open a Skardu-Kargil land route and a Sialkot-Jammu road link. There was great demand from the people living across the border for both these facilities. In 2006, Pakistan and India agreed to revive the old rail link between Sindh and Rajasthan, also known as the Munnabao-Khokrapar Express. Before the partition of India in 1947, it was known as the Sindh Mail and ran between Hyderabad (Sindh) and Ahmadabad (Gujrat). It was destroyed during the 1965 War, but was reopened later on February 16, 2006, after fervent demands and appeals from the people of Karachi.

The opening of new rail/road routes between Pakistan and India has greatly facilitated the movement of people across the border, not only for meeting members of their divided families and pilgrimage to places of worship and holy shrines, but also for trade and commercial activities.

Relaxation of Visa Regime

Over the years, strained relations marked by wars and border tensions have made the visa regime pursued by Pakistan and India highly restrictive. However, an increased flow of people across the international border has increased pressure on the two governments to move towards a liberalisation of the visa system. On September 8, 2012 when the Indian foreign minister S. M. Krishna visited Pakistan, Islamabad and New Delhi inked a landmark agreement, approving a relaxed visa regime between the two countries. The agreement made a significant departure from the past practices of highly restrictive visa regimes. Under the agreement, Pakistan and India decided, for the first time, to issue tourist visas to the nationals of the other country, opening up their rich history to the people of the two countries across the Radcliffe Line. Apart from diplomatic, non-diplomatic and official visas, the agreement enabled hassle-free issuance of a visa to a national visiting the other country to meet relatives or friends, or for any other legitimate purpose. The agreement also increased the duration of the visa to a maximum of three months at one geographical location, while the number of specified locations was increased to five. Under the agreement, a visitor visa could be issued for up to two years with multiple entries to a senior citizen (above 65 years of age). The agreement provided for the issuance of group tourist visas for individual applicants intending to travel in a group of 10 to 50 members, organised by approved tour operators or travel agents. Such a visa, valid for 30 days, would not be extendable. The students of the two countries could enjoy this facility, but they would not be able to seek admission in educational institutions of the other country.

Businessmen with an income of Rs. 500, 000 or an equivalent of this per annum, or a turnover or gross sale of Rs. 3 million were entitled to a one-year, multiple entry visa (up to four entries) for five cities. Those with a yearly income of at least Rs. 5 million or a turnover of Rs. 30 million

*Friendly Exchanges and People-to-People Contact Between Pakistan and India:
Imperatives and Impediments*

were to be given multiple entry business visas for up to 10 places with an exemption from police reporting. The agreement also provided that senior citizens of Pakistan above the age of 65 years would be granted Indian visa on their arrival at the Wagha border check point.

The new visa rules were a significant improvement on the 1974 Visa Agreement between Pakistan and India, and were therefore hailed as a success by people from all walks of life. It was hoped that these steps would further expand people-to-people contact between the two countries and facilitate friendly exchanges.⁷ It was also hoped that the relaxation in visa rules would not only promote religious tourism, but also enhance commercial tourism. The provision for the group visa was expected to encourage student exchange programmes between the two countries, organised by the universities and educational institutions of Pakistan and India. The governments of Pakistan and India were forced to ease travel restrictions under pressure from the business communities of both countries, as the volume of bilateral trade between them was increasing. The business communities also wanted to expand their links. It was for this reason that a separate category of business visa was created. This interaction is likely to increase further, as bilateral trade between Pakistan and India is expected to increase from the current level of US \$2.5 billion to US \$10 billion in a couple of years.⁸

The agreement signed in September 2012 relaxing visa rules applies to travel across international borders, but no initiative has been taken to ease travel restrictions on cross-LoC movement. The Muzaffarabad-Srinagar bus service facility is available only to the members of the divided families living in the two parts of Jammu and Kashmir. Despite calls for extending this facility to other sections of the Kashmiri population, no agreement has been reached yet.

In November 2012, a group of women activists from Indian-held Kashmir were allowed to cross over the LoC into Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) for an intra-Kashmir cross-LoC dialogue in Muzaffarabad. At the end of the dialogue, a call was made for the relaxation of the travel regime across LoC. The existing regime involves multiple security clearances, resulting in long delays in getting an entry permit. In its place,

the participants in the dialogue suggested a smart card to facilitate free movement of state subjects across the LoC. The group of women taking part in the dialogue also demanded the extension of travel facility across LoC to post-1990 refugees living in AJK, as well as hassle-free travel for senior citizens and provisions for emergency travel.⁹

Cross-LoC mobility of the people continues to be heavily constrained, not just due to the complex and cumbersome security clearance procedures, but also because visitors are not allowed to take the Muzaffarabad-Srinagar route. For instance, if a person from Srinagar wants to visit Islamabad or Rawalpindi, he or she will have to take the Srinagar-Wagha-Lahore-Rawalpindi route. Similarly, travellers from Islamabad or Rawalpindi will have to take the Lahore-Wagha-Jammu route to reach Srinagar. The Muzaffarabad-Srinagar route, as already pointed out, is restricted to the members of divided families. There have been demands that this facility be extended to other segments of society such as journalists, students, lawyers and businessmen. The restrictive travel regime across the LoC has not only restrained intra-Kashmir people-to-people contact, but has also prevented the growth of trans-LoC trade. Businessmen on both sides have complained that they have to take a much longer route while undertaking visits to either Islamabad or Srinagar. Moreover, the governments of Pakistan and India do not allow businessmen from the Indian-held Kashmir and AJK to hold meetings in these respective territories. They have to fix meetings of their trading bodies in either Sri Lanka or Turkey, whereas traders from Pakistan and India can travel freely. The unresolved nature of the Kashmir dispute continues to hamper the growth of friendly exchanges and people-to-people contact across the LoC.

The Role of Civil Society

A prominent feature of the process under which friendly exchanges and people-to-people contact between Pakistan and India have achieved rapid growth is the active role played by the civil society, particularly independent think-tanks in the private sector, and professional organisations of journalists and lawyers. Besides, through Track-II Diplomacy, retired military officers, former diplomats and distinguished

*Friendly Exchanges and People-to-People Contact Between Pakistan and India:
Imperatives and Impediments*

members of the academia have been taking part in different forums and using various platforms to create space for people-to-people contact.

On the parliamentary track, the Islamabad-based Parliamentary Institute for Development and Transparency (PILDAT) has initiated a number of dialogues between the Pakistani and Indian parliamentarians to discuss and make recommendations on ways to promote the normalisation of relations. The fifth dialogue in this series was held in Islamabad in September 2013, in which prominent parliamentarians from the two countries participated and made important suggestions. One such suggestion was to reopen the Indian Consulate in Karachi and the Pakistani diplomatic mission in Mumbai. Panellists also called for strengthening air and shipping routes between Karachi and Mumbai.¹⁰

Pakistan-India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPPFD) is an NGO that has long been working for the promotion of amity by holding seminars, conferences, discussions, and dialogues in both Pakistan and India. One such activity was a three-day convention organised by PIPFPD in the Indian city of Allahabad (UP) in January 2012. The convention ended on a positive note, with the issuance of the Allahabad Declaration, in which serious concern was expressed about the deteriorating relations between Pakistan and India. The convention called on the leadership of the two countries to work for the promotion of peace and democracy in the region.¹¹

In July 2013, civil society representatives from Pakistan and India gathered in Islamabad to hold the third round of Islamabad Dialogue, organised by the Jinnah Institute (JI) in collaboration with the New Delhi's Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR). Participants from the academia and intelligentsia, comprising defence and strategic experts, former military officials, diplomats, and representatives from different segments of civil society discussed the issues that divide Pakistan and India, and explored the possibilities of an improved relationship. They advocated enhanced diplomatic, economic, cultural, government-to-government and people-to-people contact at all levels; and suggested cross-cultural visits and initiation of formalised student exchange programmes.¹²

Impediments

Although Pakistan and India have signed an agreement for a liberalised visa regime, its implementation in letter and spirit continues to face serious hurdles. According to an Indian peace activist, the idea of ‘a relaxed visa regime’ between India and Pakistan exists only on paper, and “the biggest roadblock in normalising relationship between the two neighbours is the strict visa policy.”¹³ Pakistan peace activist Saeeda Diep has expressed similar views.

Even after the new visa agreement between Pakistan and India, the visa policy remains strict. The strict visa regime leads to a decrease in the number of passengers on Delhi-Lahore and Lahore-Amritsar bus services, as well as on twice-a-week PIA flights from Lahore to New Delhi and from Karachi to Mumbai.

India has allowed the facility of granting visa on arrival to 180 countries, but has denied the same facility to its next-door neighbour Pakistan, putting it in the same bracket as Somalia and Nigeria, in its “enemies list.” This prompted Senator Mushahid Hussain Syed to comment in the following words:

India is targeting its most culturally compatible neighbour from the normalisation process New Delhi is so fond of talking about. Such an “enemy list” clearly shows that the Delhi establishment-military and intelligence bureaucrats remain sadly stuck in an unrepentant Cold War mindset.¹⁴

The process of friendly exchanges and people-to-people contact is also severely affected by the tensions generated by the incidents of terrorism and firing across the LoC in Kashmir. Although the two countries decided to promote cooperation in sports by holding joint matches at each other’s home grounds even before the start of the Composite Dialogue, a Pakistan-India joint cricket series has remained suspended since the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008. Similarly, the incidents of firing and killing of soldiers from both sides of the LoC in early 2013 and in August 2014 led to the temporary suspension of trans-LoC trade and Muzaffarabad-Srinagar bus service. In May 2013, India asked Pakistan to

*Friendly Exchanges and People-to-People Contact Between Pakistan and India:
Imperatives and Impediments*

call off the visit of pilgrims to the annual *urs* at the Sufi shrine at Ajmer Sharif. The reason cited for this by the Indian Government was that they would not be in a position to ensure the safety and security of pilgrims due to the tension created by the brutal murder of an Indian prisoner in Pakistan's Kot Lakhpat Jail in Lahore.¹⁵

Conclusion

There are substantial imperatives for increased people-to-people contact and friendly exchanges between Pakistan and India. These stem from their common history and geographical proximity, as well as the growing need for inter-regional and intra-regional connectivity, among others, through SAARC and SAFTA.

The process of friendly exchanges and people-to-people contact, however, continues to remain heavily strained. The constraints reflect the deep mistrust and suspicion with which the nationals of the two countries view each other. There is no doubt that there has been considerable expansion of people-to-people contact and friendly exchanges between Pakistan and India following the commencement of the Composite Dialogue and Peace Process in 2004. However, frequent disruptions of the peace process have caused a serious setback to the process of people-to-people contact and friendly exchanges. As per conventional wisdom, people-to-people contacts will not really take off until the core issues between the two countries are resolved, or at least until serious efforts are made through dialogue and negotiations to resolve them.

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Strategic Studies

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