

Why promoting people-to-people contact between India and Pakistan will not help

For anyone to imagine that public diplomacy and humanitarian gestures on social media will prove to be a game-changer, is to live on cloud cuckoo land.

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One of the most enduring, and one daresay touching, articles of faith in India's Pakistan policy is that promoting people-to-people contacts between the peoples of India and Pakistan can prove to be a game-changer.

Like everything else in government, this heroic assumption has been a victim of inertia. Because it has acquired the status of a self-evident truth, no one has ever really bothered to do an empirical analysis of how much people-to-people contact has helped in changing perceptions of India in Pakistan, or for that matter, building a constituency of peace in that country. Even a rudimentary audit of the efficacy and utility of the people-to-people policy would reveal it has absolutely nothing to commend it. If anything, out of all the wrong notions that have guided India's Pakistan policy, this is perhaps the most glaring.

Reality

In the last couple of years, the government seems to be waking up to the reality that people-to-people is something of a mug's game. This is being reflected in the steep reduction in visas being issued to Pakistanis — from over 1 lakh visas that were issued to Pakistanis until 2015, to just over 50,000 in 2016 and only around 35,000 in 2017. But even the 35,000 figure

is troublesome. It means that on an average 100 Pakistanis are entering India every day.

While the government claims that they have a system in place to verify the antecedents of Pakistanis coming into India, the fact of the matter is that the robustness of this system is extremely questionable. There is really no way to vet the people travelling to India, much less monitor their activities while they are in India. The hollowness of the verification system is borne out by numerous instances where the verification happens after Pakistani travellers have returned to their country.

Even as India cuts down on the visas issued to Pakistanis, there has been a bit of back-tracking on the issue of medical visas. After taking a decision in June last that medical visas will be issued only after applications for such visas are endorsed by the Pakistani foreign minister (or his equivalent), the Indian side has backed down and diluted, nay erased, this condition.

It is hardly an edifying sight to see the Indian external affairs minister, Sushma Swaraj, playing the role of the joint secretary CPV (consular, passport, and visa) division, by issuing orders on twitter for the issuance of medical visas to Pakistanis.

As a very hard-nosed and hard-headed politician, she should be the last person to think that her taking the humanitarian high ground with a country like Pakistan — the Pakistanis summarily rejected that the head of their foreign ministry will put in a request for medical visas for their own citizens — will change anything insofar as the inimical and hostile attitude of the Pakistani state, and even Pakistani people, towards India, is concerned.



Entitlement

Quite aside the chutzpah of the Pakistani authorities who seem to have a sense of entitlement in getting medical visas to India (something that is apparent from the statements of their foreign office spokespersons), the simple fact of the matter is that there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that the medical visa policy has generated any goodwill for India in Pakistan.

The thing is that people who come to India are mostly those who can't afford to go for treatment to the West. By definition, these are people who have no say or influence in the policy of their country. They are nowhere in the pecking order in Pakistan and have no role to play in shaping public opinion.

Worse, while their choice of India is a function of their economic status, their goodwill is also ephemeral. Those who call the shots in Pakistan and can influence policy and public opinion, don't come to India. They go to UK, US or some other Western country. These people are so embedded in the thinking of the Pakistani establishment, that they, in any case, have virtually nothing good to say about India.

Cricket

The same is the case in every other field. Pakistani cricketers die to play in IPL because of the money, but go back and bad-mouth India by talking of hindu zehniyat (Hindu mentality); artistes like Ghulam Ali love to come to India for the importance they get (including from politicians who think that by sucking up to a Pakistani, they will prove their secular credentials and get Muslim votes), but go back and talk about how much they love the Kafirs (infidels) money — the other stuff they say is not printable; journalists come to India and talk of peace but in their TV shows not only bat for terrorists like Hafiz Saeed and Masood Azhar but also ask why terrorists are killing the momin (faithful) instead of going to India and killing the Kafirs; one could go on and on giving examples of the duplicitous behaviour of the Pakistanis, but suffice to say that this people-to-people nonsense is just not working. In fact, it cannot work as long as the dominant narrative of the Pakistani state and society is anti-Hindu and anti-India.

The bottom-line is that if the centuries of living together did not develop enough of an empathy and understanding — remember the butchery and ethnic cleansing in Punjab in 1947 and the continuing persecution of Hindus and other minorities in Pakistan — the chances of a meeting or two between

civil society activists or between forked-tongue foreign policy works and members of the strategic community, a few hundred or even thousand visas, or the exchange of artistes, sportsmen and other such initiatives, is hardly going to change anything.

Therefore, for anyone to imagine that public diplomacy and humanitarian gestures on social media will prove to be a game-changer, is to live on cloud cuckoo land. Rather than make its Pakistan policy on the basis of desire, India would do well to make policy on basis of reality.

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Mega Lecture