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Maini, Tridivesh Singh

Naval Postgraduate School (U.S.)

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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



Cultural Insights: Punjab: Can It Be a Bridge to Peace Between India and Pakistan?

Tridivesh Singh Maini, 10/1/2011

Introduction

During the course of this write-up, the writer seeks to explore an area which has not been researched enough, both within South Asia, and outside the region; the potential role of Punjabi identity in narrowing the divide and acting as a bridge between India and Pakistan.

At the outset, it would be important to familiarize all of you with the term “Punjab” and its geographical location (though I presume, that most, if not all of you would be more than familiar with the Punjab and its geographical location). The word Punjab, means “Land of the Five Rivers” in Persian. The five rivers are Sutlej, Beas, Jhelum, Chenab and Ravi. In the pre-1947 epoch, Punjab was an important geographical unit of South Asia, *with Afghanistan to its West, the Central Indian Plateau to its East, Kashmir to its North and Sindh and Rajasthan to its South.*

After the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the larger part of Punjab went to Pakistan, while a much smaller portion merged with India. Three rivers (Sutlej, Beas and Ravi) remained with the Indian side of Punjab while two (Jhelum, Chenab) went to Pakistan. In 1965, the Indian side of Punjab further got trifurcated into the states of Haryana and Himachal. In the present day, Punjab is a region that encompasses Northern India and Eastern Pakistan. Punjab is bounded on the north by the vast Himalayan ranges, which divide it from China, Tibet and Kashmir; on the east by the river Yamuna, the North-Western Provinces and the Chinese Empire; on the south by Sind, the river Sutlej, which separates it from Bhawalpur, and Rajputana; and on the west by the Sulaiman range, which divides it from Baluchistan, and Afghanistan, which joins the Khyber.

Common Identity

Punjabis on both sides also share a common cultural identity, which is referred to as ‘Punjabiyaat’. While the spoken language of all Punjabis is Punjabi, folk tales like *Heer Ranjha* and *Sahiba Mirza* considered the sub-continental equivalent of *Romeo and Juliet* bond all Punjabis. Apart from cultural commonalities, heroes too are common and actually still remain. Some prominent examples of common heroes on both sides are Guru Nanak Dev founder of the Sikh faith who is revered by both Sikhs and Muslims, Waris Shah, Baba Bulle Shah and Baba Farid all Sufi saints respected on both sides of the border and freedom fighters like Bhagat Singh. In the aftermath of partition, this Punjabi identity suffered to some degree, because government policies in Pakistani Punjab were unfavorable towards the Punjabi language and while Punjabis dominated virtually every realm in Pakistan, the Punjabi identity and Sufi thought was not given much importance.

Change in the Last Few Years: From Battleground to Connector?

It would be only fair to mention here that over the last few years that some policy makers, a handful of strategic analysts and academics have begun to realize that Punjab on both sides has a pivotal role to play in acting as a bridge between both the countries, the reasons amongst others are cultural commonalities, economic interests and most importantly the logic of geography which binds both the Punjabs.

For a long time after the vivisection of India, Punjab was projected as the flag bearer of conflict. Firstly, even if both the Punjabs were to forget partition, and the wars which both sides have fought, the other major roadblock to Punjab playing a positive role in Indo-Pak relations was that while Indian Punjab was too small and insignificant to influence policy makers at the national level, Pakistani Punjab had donned the mantle of Pakistani Nationalism, this phenomenon can be attributed to the complete domination of all political institutions and most importantly the army by Punjab. This point is very well illustrated by the following statistics:

Punjabis make up 50 percent of Pakistan's population and constitute a disproportionate percentage of the army. According to the Brookings Institution's Stephen P. Cohen, 75 percent of the army comes from just three districts in Punjab and two bordering districts in the Northwest Frontier Province. The officer corps, while more urban and diverse, remains disproportionately Punjabi as well.

More than sixty decades after partition, it would not be wrong to say that Punjab on both sides is emerging as a bridge, rather than battleground, between both countries as interactions have seen a manifold increase and Punjabis on both sides (especially the Indian side) have begun to realize that the biggest sufferer of war in economic terms is the Punjab, while the biggest beneficiary of Indo-Pak peace can be the Punjab.

A good illustration of this point is the fact that despite the two central governments bristling with hostility, trade at the Wagah border (the main land crossing between both countries, which divides the two Punjabs) nearly tripled. The total value of exports to Pakistan from the April to October 2008 period, before the Mumbai attack in November, was approximately \$23.59 million; during the same period in 2009, that figure nearly tripled to \$66.71.

One other reason for the thaw between the two Punjabs is the common culture. For long, this aspect of the relationship was overlooked both within South Asia and outside, but of late the cultural angle has begun to draw some attention. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, people to people contact between the two countries in general and the Punjabs in particular has seen an increase in the last decade. The organizations which have done yeoman's service to enhance interaction between the two Punjabs are the World Punjabi Congress and the South Asian Free Media Association. Maximum credit for emphasizing the importance of Punjab in the Indo-Pak relationship goes to civil society organizations like the World Punjabi Congress. Led by a former Federal Minister, Fakhar Zaman this organization has been advocating easing out of visa-procedures, opening up trade routes and promotion of a common Punjabi identity. In fact, even the rapport between the erstwhile Chief Ministers of both the provinces (Captain Amarinder Singh, Indian Punjab and Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, Pakistani Punjab) began as a result of a WPC function organized at Lahore by Zaman in January 2004.

Second, there is a growing realization in the political leadership not only of both Punjabs, but also at the national level, that interactions will be beneficial. While between 2004 and 2007, the erstwhile Chief Ministers of both provinces were responsible for pushing cooperation between the provinces. Off late even prominent national leaders, most notably the former Prime Minister of Pakistan and head of the Pakistani Muslim League (Nawaz), (PML-N), Nawaz Sharif at a public speech, in Lahore, spoke about not only a better relationship between India and Pakistan, but also between the two Punjabs which share a common culture and heritage.

Thirdly, the Punjabi diaspora from both India and Pakistan has played a stellar role in the thaw between the two Punjabs. Being away from home the diaspora is free from the baggage of the sub-continent. It is important to note that at an individual level, Pakistani Punjabis and Indian Punjabis got along extremely well on foreign shores even when there was tension between the two countries. Back home in the sub-continent, both sides were apprehensive of openly exhibiting any sort of affinity for the other side. The diaspora has played a very constructive role in encouraging the growth of "Punjabi-ness" or a common culture. Alyssa Ayres rightly states that:

The two Punjabs wield disproportionate influence in their respective countries, and they can call upon a prosperous and culturally active diaspora in the West, which, through the growing popularity of Punjabi musical and cultural events, has begun to carve out a distinct Punjabi sensibility that transcends the national divides back "home."

Amongst other initiatives of the diaspora, two stand out. The International Journal of Punjab Studies,

Academy of the Punjab in North America, APNA and The International Journal of Punjab Studies started in UK was the first which brought together scholars from both the Punjabs and had articles on the economy, culture and polity of the Punjabs. APNA is amongst the first organizations, to promote Punjabi Culture over the internet. More recently, it has started a Punjabi magazine called "Lehar" which is published in both scripts, Gurmukhi (East Punjab) and Shahmukhi (West Punjab).

Fourthly, the angle of religious tourism has also played a pivotal role in bringing both Punjab's closer. In the last six years, Sikh pilgrims have been paying obeisance at historical religious shrines in Pakistan, such as Nankana Sahib and Panja Sahib. These pilgrimages have not been disrupted even during times of tension. Pilgrims, who are apprehensive about visiting Pakistan, return with a different opinion, as they are warmly received by the Pakistani public. One particular idea for enhancing religious connectivity between India and Pakistan have been gaining ground. It is the campaign for the Kartarpur corridor. For those not familiar with the term, Kartarpur (now in Pakistan) is the place where the founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, spent the last 18 years of his life and had both Hindu and Muslim followers. Kartarpur, which falls in district Narowal, is home to the Sikh shrine Darbar Sahib, and this shrine is barely three kilometres from the Indian border. Before the Indo-Pak war of 1965, it is said that there was a bridge on the Ravi that Sikh pilgrims could cross over and visit Darbar Sahib. During the 1965 war, however, this bridge was destroyed; it might be mentioned that the relationship between the two countries became more tense in the aftermath of this war and visa regimes became stricter with the passage of time.

For a long time—nearly a decade—Sikhs, predominantly settled in the Indian Punjab, have been demanding visa-free access to Darbar Sahib. This demand has been accepted by the Pakistan government and is being looked into by the Indian Government. The demand for the Kartarpur Corridor has been receiving the support of diaspora Sikhs and The Institute of Multi-Track Diplomacy, a Virginia-based organization actively engaged in conflict resolution in South Asia and other parts of the world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are numerous impediments to Punjab-Punjab interactions, as nation-states determine these policies and there is only a limited role which a common cultural identity can play in reducing tensions between countries. But I would like to make the point that the New Delhi and Islamabad dominated dialogue have failed to come up with any solution to vexed issues like Kashmir. Maybe sub-regions like Punjab and other border provinces like Rajasthan-Sind which have positive vested interests in the borders opening up can pressurize central governments to seriously examine the need for higher levels of trade and sustained people to people interactions.

Over and above anything else, ever since the partition of 1947, there is a feeling that the Muslim-Non Muslim rift is something indelible and permanent. If both the Punjabs can lead the way it would be ironic that a region partitioned on the basis of religion acts the "peacemaker" utilizing amongst other tools a common culture. But there is only a limited role which a common identity can play in bridging the gaps.

Finally, members of the strategic community need to pay more serious attention to the fact that the common Punjabi identity could be a useful way of countering the rising wave of fundamentalism in Pakistani Punjab, which was earlier dominated by Sufi thought.

*Tridivesh Singh Maini is an Associate Fellow with The Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.
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