

A new voice for a new region

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All those factors that have traditionally hampered peace between India and Pakistan may be coming together for the sake of a peaceful and prosperous South Asia.

"We have a great desire to live in peace and harmony, like good neighbours. I can never understand why some forces do not want it to happen." Politicians have vested interest. If they let the conflicts between India and Pakistan resolved, what will be the issues they may politicise?" "It is all for defence budget. Our armies want to have unlimited, un-audited budgets in the name of security. The real beneficiaries of this approach are those who want to sell and experiment their ammunition." "There are very few people on both sides of the border who do not want peace between India and Pakistan due to their vested interest. Majority of us are peace lovers." "It is all media hype. Media want to sensitise the issue. They generate controversies to sell their products but in the process hamper peace process."

It is very common to hear these conversations, especially when an ordinary Pakistani meets an ordinary Indian for the very first time. Informed by the history of partition that has been taught to them in their respective country, initially they may have an enemy image of each other. But very soon they realise that both of them are normal human beings and can live like good neighbours, if not like close friends.

As they say perceptions often outlive reality. How did people form the perception that there are certain actors that hamper peace process? I work on indigenous knowledge and local wisdom in the context of rural livelihoods and am a firm believer that one should start one's analysis using locally held perceptions as an entry point (without prejudging if they are right or wrong).

First of all, it is said that media create misunderstandings. Personally I don't think it is valid any more because state-controlled TV and newspapers have lost their monopoly of the media market. One hardly finds a mention of Pakistan in major Indian newspapers. They have their own problems to talk about and are trying to build India's image vis-a-vis international players like the United States and China. Likewise in Pakistan, one finds that print media will love to utilise any available column space for advertisements even if it happens at the cost of some important news story. No wonder, on both sides, the projection of enemy image by print media has reduced considerably. As far as electronic media are concerned, state TV on both sides are still his master's vice. Barring them, most of the private channels cannot afford to create a distinction between Indian and Pakistani viewers on commercial grounds. They have to market their channels in Europe, North America and the Gulf to the South Asian diasporas. None of the private channels can afford to be labeled as biased. That is why they tend to remain neutral if they can. Rather, it has become very common for Pakistani and Indian TV channels to embark on joint productions, not just of soaps that are so popular on both sides of the border.

Now, let us talk of politicians. Does one really feel that most of them have vested interest against peace? Here again I will like to submit that politicians always require an issue to remain active. They have to find someone to blame for every wrong in the world. Till General Zia's and Indra Gandhi's

era, or may be even much after that, the trend among politicians was to bash their counterparts across the border for anything that went wrong in their own constituency. Peace supporters were termed as traitors in that era and Kashmir was either the 'jugular vein' or the 'unimputable limb' in official documents. Opposing India in Pakistan and vice versa was considered to be a major vote winning factor. But the new breed of politicians as well as voters don't have as bitter partition memories as their older counterparts had and one finds that Kashmir no longer wins and loses elections in both the countries.

Another perception is that the status quo between India and Pakistan is in favour of certain players including defence forces as well as global powers who never want regional stability in South Asia. Though in India armed forces have remained subservient to the elected politicians, yet a strong defence was always considered to be the only remedy way to counter threats from Pakistan and China. This has always led the Indian parliament to approve enormous defence expenditure (that it subsequently led to various scams involving kickbacks was logical.)

In Pakistan, armed forces have had two jobs to deliver — taking care of the 'external security issues' and 'helping out' the elected representatives in domestic governance (by relieving them of their responsibilities in the form of declared or undeclared martial law). Thus army has always remained superior to the parliament and the defence budget always out of bound for civil policy makers.

The situation in the sub-continent had been ideal for non-regional superpowers, especially the United States, which finds India and Pakistan as an ideal market to sell obsolete technology and ammunition. Furthermore, Pak-India tension indirectly supported US's interest in Afghan war when the Soviet Union still existed. For the jihadis, Afghanistan and Kashmir both were a route to secure assured heaven and martyrdom.

But things dramatically changed after September 11, 2001. Taliban, the then rulers of Afghanistan, had to bear the brunt of 9/11 and linkage between regional instability and terrorism became an issue for western scholars. Close links between mujahideen in Afghanistan and Kashmir and the ban on many jihadi outfits in Pakistan under the American pressure should be seen in this context. Six years down the road, one still doesn't see any signs of stability in Afghanistan. America is gradually adopting a policy to concentrate on the stability in periphery regions for long term stability in the centre — that is, the Middle East. Apparently, there are general hints that both India and Pakistan should nurture peace in the region. Moreover, the American government will like to put a stop on China's ever-increasing trade and economic growth. A strong and stable South Asia can help the United States challenge the Chinese juggernaut.

The other factors that are compelling international/global players to foster peace between India and Pakistan are trade, globalisation and markets. The need for them to exploit/access Central Asian markets/resources through Pakistan/Afghanistan is becoming increasingly urgent given the growing international energy requirements and a steep sense of energy insecurity feeding on instability in energy-hit regions like the Middle East and Africa. This is clearly shown in how the Americans have reacted to two energy pipelines connecting South Asia with either Central Asia or the Gulf region. While Washington has been actively supporting Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipeline, its opposition to the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline is too visible to be easily ignored. India's energy needs — as well as its need to capture regional markets including that of Afghanistan — should be also not underestimated.

India, because of these reasons and the American desire to treat it at par with China, may be feeling the urge for peace better than Pakistan does. Also, the fact that the size and strength of peace constituency is bigger in India than it is in Pakistan, makes the case for India not being as inimical to bilateral peace as it used to be in the past.

One more factor that gives the peace process another positive push is the personal influence of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Seen as someone who is not afraid of taking bold decisions, he is being banked upon for making landmark adjustments not just within Indian society but also with neighbours including India and Pakistan.

In Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf is looking forward to his next term in presidency with his uniform on. Despite his best efforts, he has not been able to prove a reliable ally in war on terrorism for the United States. He is under continuous pressure to do more on this count. In an attempt to divert this pressure and promote the soft image of Pakistan, he is talking of innovative solutions on the Kashmir issue. There has always been some analysts who suggest that civil governments cannot dare solve the Kashmir issue, only a militaryman can. So, he must. Genuine opposition comprising of progressive leaders in exile has no choice but to support the general for his peace initiatives. Friendly opposition, that is, religious outfits, are too busy in securing their own governments in the Frontier and Balochistan. Other domestic issues like the Women Protection Act are consuming their energies too much to let them focus on Pakistan-India ties. As statements by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly has shown, the bellicosity among Pakistani religious outfits is more focussed on America than on India. In fact, many senior leaders of religious political parties have of late spoken softly about Pakistan-India peace.

All ingredients for a long lasting peace are, therefore, in place. India, because of its economic priorities, energy crisis, and future growth; Pakistan, because of its domestic political situation; media for commercial concerns; and America because of its requirement to have stability in Afghanistan — all these players seem to be well-paced to do their bit for a peaceful and prosperous South Asia.

It is in this context that common citizens and masses both in Pakistan and India are looking forward to a long lasting peace. They will not like unseen forces to hamper peace process once again. They are looking for a different South Asia — a new South which is premised on the axiom that every single individual on earth has both the potential and the right to live a decent life; a new South Asia that is prosperous and free from the clutches of poverty and despair; a new South Asia is a celebration of diversity, the home of most diverse and colourful human society in the world.

Across cultures and civilizations, experiences and movements have shown that even the poorest of the poor can work to bring about their own development. This is an opportunity for the leaders of the two countries to shun the tainted practice of hegemony and oppression in the name of religions, ethnicity, caste and culture. A new South Asia and its dynamic millions cannot simply wait on the sideline for ages to realise their dreams or a democratic, decentralised political system which gives everyone their rights as citizens at the same time respecting their differences as individuals, as communities and as nations.

P.S.

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