

The two Punjabs

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Even in the midst of tensions between India and Pakistan, people to people linkages between both countries – with both Punjabs (Indian and Pakistani) as key stakeholders – have given reason for cautious optimism.

While cultural commonalities and the emotional attachment on both sides has been the driving force for Punjab-Punjab initiatives, the potential economic benefits of improved relations have been repeatedly reiterated not just by the business communities, but political leaders (especially from Indian Panjab)

In recent years, ties between both countries have steadily deteriorated. After the Pulwama terror attack in 2019, economic linkages between both countries have got severely impacted, and this has taken its toll on the economy of Panjab (India). India imposed tariffs on Pakistani imports, and revoked Most Favoured Nation MFN status to Pakistan in February 2019, while in August 2019, trade links via the Wagah (Pakistan) -Attari (India) land crossing were snapped after the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. The suspension of trade ties between both countries has had a serious impact on the economy of the border belt of Punjab (India) with over 9,000 families being impacted as a result of job losses in the tertiary sector.

Developments of the past few months

The one glimmer of hope has been the Kartarpur Religious Corridor which was inaugurated in 2019 (in 2020 this was closed due to the covid 19 pandemic but re-opened in November 2021). The Corridor connects Dera Baba Nanak (Panjab, India) with Darbar Sahib (Kartarpur, Narowal, Pakistan) which is the final resting place of Guru Nanak (the founder of the Sikh faith). Devotees from Panjab (India) can pay obeisance at Darbar Sahib (Kartarpur) without a visa, though they do need to carry their passports. While the number of people crossing over, via the corridor, is way below the initial target of 5000, it has helped in promoting people to people ties as well as re-uniting a number of separated families. There has been a growing demand for easing out visa procedures for individuals over the age of 75 years and those from separated families (some of the individuals reunited at Kartarpur have been issued visas) which has been backed strongly by civil society organisations – as in the past.

The phase from 2019-2022 has been witness to people to people linkages, especially with regard to religious tourism, but interactions between state governments of both the Punjabs, or what is referred to as 'paradiplomacy' unlike earlier years has been restricted. After the re-opening of the corridor in November 2021, then Chief Minister of Panjab (India) Charanjit Singh Channi, and other political leaders from the state, paid obeisance at Darbar Sahib (Kartarpur), while also flagging the need for resumption of trade via the Wagah-Attari land crossing – though to no avail.

There have however been calls for resumption of trade from sections of Punjab's political class, business community as well as farmers from Indian Punjab. Pakistan which has been buying essential commodities including wheat at exorbitant prices could purchase the same

from Panjab (India) and the Punjabi farmer could benefit by getting much higher prices for his produce.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even in the midst of strained ties between both countries, the Punjab has played an important role in trying to reduce tensions and build bridges between both countries, and the role of civil society, business community on both sides and the diaspora needs to be acknowledged. In the 75th year of independence while ties between New Delhi and Islamabad remain strained developments of the past few months, in the realm of people to people contact have given reason for hope as a result of the tireless efforts of civil society and some individuals committed to peace. The next stage of this should be easing out of visa regimes especially for certain categories of individuals – specifically those over the age of 75 who want to visit their ancestral homes. Resumption of trade via the Wagah-Attari land crossing will benefit not just Panjab (India) but other parts of North India and the Pakistani consumer. If both countries can focus on giving a greater fillip to people to people linkages and economic ties – with the Punjabs taking the lead – ties between India and Pakistan could be less frosty.

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