



The Politics of Kartarpur Corridor and India-Pakistan Relations

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Any thaw in the Indo-Pak relationship is usually welcomed and reciprocated with good gestures on either side. However, this time, such a gesture has evoked mixed response from India.

The history of India-Pakistan relationship is a history of mistrust, broken promises, unresolved issues, and unending conflicts. Because of the divisive impact of various factors relating to ideology, a violent legacy of partition, images of the neighbour as enemy, and various unresolved issues including Kashmir, the two countries have been locked in a complex situation where intended gain for one side is viewed as an equivalent loss to the other. According to K. Natwar Singh, India's former foreign secretary, the India-Pakistan relationship is "chronically accident prone" for Pakistan is too changeable and unpredictable making normalisation impossible.²

The Indo-Pak relationship has witnessed several breakdowns and limited breakthroughs. Continuing hostility has vitiated the geopolitical environment on both sides of the border. Despite prevailing tensions, some sections of civil-society in both countries have focused their attention on discussing and finding ways to resolve outstanding issues. Since the two countries share a common socio-cultural heritage, it is believed that a workable relationship based on peaceful co-existence can certainly develop. Any attempt to improve the bilateral relations or any goodwill gesture by one side therefore often evokes a similar response from the other side. The recent announcement on the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor for Sikh pilgrims and connect two Sikh holy shrines—Dera Baba Nanak Sahib (India) and Kartarpur Sahib (Pakistan), is a welcome development in this regard.

Importance of Kartarpur Sahib

The greatly revered first guru of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Dev, spent at least the last 18 years of his life in Kartarpur. Traditions that have come down narrate that when his followers became aware of his preparation for the *Joti Jot* (Heavenly Abode), tensions arose amongst them to be the rightful claimants to his mortal remains.³ Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims wanted to perform the last rite as per the established practices in their tradition. In other words, Sikhs and Hindus wanted to cremate his body, whereas Muslims wanted it to be buried. In order to resolve the issue, the followers approached Guru Nanak Dev who then advised his Sikh and Hindu followers to place flowers to his right side and Muslims to his left. He then told his followers that the permission to perform the last rite would be determined by the freshness of the flowers in the morning. In other words, if the flowers to his left remained fresh, the Muslims would have the right to perform the last rite and if the flowers to his right remained fresh, then the Sikhs and Hindus could cremate his body.



Gurudwara Kartarpur Sahib (Pakistan)

It is said that when the followers returned the next morning (September 22, 1539), they were surprised to see that Guru Nanak Dev's body had disappeared and that all the flowers were fresh.⁴ Therefore, the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims took the flowers and performed the last rite according to their respective faiths. Due to this very reason, Guru Nanak Dev has a cremation site as well as a grave.⁵ The present day Kartarpur Sahib has his grave in its courtyard. After Kartarpur became a part of Pakistan in August 1947, the Sikhs in India were deprived of their unhindered access to the holy site. It was also the time when the construction of Gurudwara was taking place.

The Demand for Kartarpur Sahib Corridor

The demand to open the corridor leading to Kartarpur Sahib for Indian Sikh pilgrims has been raised by India on several occasions. During his historic visit to Lahore in 1999 on the *Sada-e-Sarhad* or the Delhi-Lahore Bus, the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee raised the issue with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif. According to few reports, in November 2000, General Pervez Musharraf, then Chief Executive of Pakistan, gave a green signal to construct a corridor to facilitate the Sikh devotees' visit to Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara.⁶ Later, in an interview, Lt. Gen. Javed Nasir, the then Chairman of *Pakistan Sikh Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee* (PSGPC) shared details of the plan.⁷ However, this could not be taken up for final agreement.

It is important to note that Lt. Gen. Javed Nasir was known to have hard-line approach. He was one of the highly Islamised officers of the Pakistan Army who, in fact, believed that "Khalistan" could be achieved through peaceful means.⁸ In a reception hosted in Lahore by former Delhi Gurudwara Management Committee President Parmjit Singh Sarna, Gen. Nasir argued that Sikhs must get their demands regarding separate identity incorporated in the constitution before launching a separatist movement.⁹

In 2004, the then Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh informed the then Chief Minister of Punjab, Captain Amrinder Singh that the Indian government would take the issue up again with Pakistan during the next bilateral talks.¹⁰ However, there were no major developments on the issue since then.

Sidhu-Bajwa Hug Controversy

In August 2018, PM designate Imran Khan invited the former cricketer Navjot Singh Sidhu from India to his inauguration ceremony. It was during this visit that Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, apparently hinted to Sidhu of Pakistan's readiness for opening of the Kartarpur Corridor. However, the Bajwa-Sidhu bonhomie created considerable controversy in the Indian media. In an interview to NDTV, Sidhu later clarified that during the inaugural ceremony, Pakistani Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa walked up to him and told that "Navjot, we want peace...Islamabad would open the corridor to Gurudwara Darbar Sahib at Kartarpur on the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak in 2019."¹¹ There was however no formal announcement of this by the government of Pakistan despite clarifications being sought.

As events unfolded, on November 22, 2018, Union Cabinet of India, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, passed a resolution to celebrate the 550th Birth Anniversary of Shri Guru Nanak Dev in 2019¹² and approved the building and development of Kartarpur corridor from Dera Baba Nanak in Gurdaspur District to the International Border (IB) on the Indian side to facilitate pilgrims from India to visit Gurudwara Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan.¹³ India then also urged the Pakistani government to recognise the sentiments of the Sikh community in India and develop a corridor with suitable facilities in their territory, that is, from the IB to Kartarpur Sahib.

Pakistan's Quick Approval

At this stage, contrary to general expectations in India, Pakistan accepted the demand and conveyed that it was ready to open the corridor for Sikh pilgrimages. Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, announced his government's decision on social media. On Twitter, he wrote that "Pakistan has already conveyed to India its decision to open Kartarpur Corridor for Baba Guru Nanak's 550th birth anniversary. Prime Minister Imran Khan will do break ground at Kartarpur facilities on 28th November. We welcome the Sikh community to Pakistan for this auspicious occasion." The press release by the Pakistan's Foreign Ministry on November 23, 2018 stated that:

In line with the principles of Islam and the Quaid-e-Azam's vision of a peaceful neighbourhood, Pakistan's initiative will further facilitate Sikhs, especially from India. Pakistan's Kartarpur Spirit can be a step forward in the right direction from conflict to cooperation, animosity to peace and enmity to friendship.¹⁴



Vice-President Venkaiah Naidu Laying the Foundation Stone

On November 26, 2018, Vice-President of India, Venkaiah Naidu laid the foundation stone of the proposed corridor at the Indian side. During the ceremony, he stated that "I am happy that Pakistan accepted the long-pending demand of Kartarpur corridor fulfilling the demands of the Sikh community. Now, you would not have to take a long and arduous route through the Attari border. The corridor will become a symbol of love and peace between both countries."¹⁵ Following this, a ground-breaking ceremony was held in Pakistan in the presence of Indian politicians namely, Harsimrat Kaur Badal, Hardeep Singh Puri and Navjot Singh Sidhu.



Groundbreaking Ceremony in Pakistan

Pakistan's Growing Frustration

It is important to understand that due to religious sentiments running high in the state of Punjab, India took immediate steps to expedite the process. Notably, India, despite having better relations and regular communication, in the past could not get Pakistani approval for its request to open up the corridor for Sikh pilgrims. This time, the sudden change of attitude and quick approval of the project surprised many. It is pertinent to analyse the reason behind this sudden change of heart. The press release by Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on November 23, 2018, indicated Pakistan's desire to initiate a dialogue with India on issues beyond the Kartarpur Corridor.

Ever since the Government of India toughened its position on bilateral dialogue and made it clear that talks and terror could not go together, there were no meaningful progress in bilateral relations. When in November 2016, India decided not to participate in 19th SAARC summit scheduled to be held in Islamabad, other neighbouring countries followed suit. The message was loud and clear; if Pakistan does not address the issue of terrorism, it will face regional as well as international isolation. Pakistan is under tremendous pressure to engage in a dialogue with India.

During the ground-breaking ceremony of Kartarpur Corridor, Imran Khan called for a forward-looking approach to resolve all the bilateral issues. However, India's External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj clarified that the Kartarpur talks were not the resumption of the bilateral dialogue between the two countries.¹⁶ She categorically stated that:

See, bilateral dialogues and Kartarpur corridor are two different things. And I am very happy that for the last 20 years, rather many years, India has been asking for the Kartarpur corridor and for the first time, Pakistan responded positively to this. But it doesn't mean that the bilateral dialogue will start only on this. The bilateral talks always say that terror and talks can't go together. The moment Pakistan stops terrorist activities in India, the dialogue can start. But the dialogue is not only connected with Kartarpur Corridor.¹⁷

This did not go down well in Pakistan, as it had thought of using the Kartarpur Corridor issue to generate goodwill on the one hand and bring India back to the dialogue table on the other. Although, it was able to generate some amount of goodwill, especially in the state of Punjab, it failed completely to widen the scope of dialogue. Despite its unhappiness, Pakistan continued with the process and shared a draft agreement on January 21, 2019 and invited India to send a delegation to negotiate and finalise the agreement on opening of the Kartarpur Corridor.¹⁸ In response, India shared coordinates of the zero point (crossing point) and also proposed dates for the Pakistani delegation to visit India for discussions and finalisation of the modalities.¹⁹

Since, India did not agree to widen the scope of dialogue and strictly kept it limited to Kartarpur Corridor, Pakistan's frustration reached a new height. Fawad Chaudhury, the Information Minister of Pakistan, in an interview to the Gulf News on January 28 stated that "It is useless to talk to them (India) now unless there is some stability. We will move forward once the new government is formed after the elections. We have delayed our efforts to hold talks with India because we do not expect any big decision from the present Indian leadership."²⁰ This was possibly the reflection of the growing frustration.

Temporary Hiccups

Despite a terror attack in J&K's Pulwama on February 14, 2019 that killed 40 personnel of Central Reserved Police Force (CRPF) and India's pre-emptive non-military strike on Jaish-e-Mohammad's training camp in Balakot followed by the dogfights in the air, the talks on Kartarpur continued. The meeting took place at Atari on March 14 during which the two sides held constructive discussions on a range of issues related to the proposed Kartarpur Sahib corridor.²¹ Technical experts of the two countries on March 19 met at Zero point to discuss technical details such as Finished Road Level, High Flood Level etc.²² The two sides also agreed to have next meeting at Wagha on April 2 to finalise the operationalisation of the corridor.

Amid the preparation on both sides, Pakistan's Federal Cabinet constituted a new 10 member Pakistan Sikh Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (PSGPC) on March 27 which included Bishon Singh, Kuljit Singh, Maninder Singh, Gopal Singh Chawla, Mahinder Pal Singh, Sahib Singh, Santokh Singh, Shamsher Singh, Tara Singh and Bhagat Singh. The inclusion of Gopal Singh Chawla in the PSGPC reportedly irked India to the extent that it not only sought clarification, but also conveyed that the next meeting on the modalities could be scheduled after receiving Pakistani response.²³

Indian media portrays Gopal Singh Chawla as a “Khalistani Terrorist” being a close aide of Lashkar-e-Toiba chief Hafiz Saeed. However, according to *The Print* Chawala has never been associated with any terror activity and Indian intelligence agencies do not enlist his name even as a suspect.²⁴ Pakistan regretted the postponement of the proposed meeting without prior consultations and underlined that it could stymie the progress.²⁵ It appears to be a temporary hiccup and would most certainly be resolved by both sides soon to facilitate the process.

Implications on Bilateral Relations

As noted earlier, any thaw in the Indo-Pak relationship is usually welcomed and reciprocated with good gestures on either side. However, this time, such a gesture from the Pakistani side has evoked mixed response from India. By and large the liberal intelligentsia and people of Punjab have welcomed the Kartarpur initiative and want it to reach its logical conclusion as soon as possible. However, those having hard-line approach towards Pakistan are sceptical and caution New Delhi about a Pakistani design and possible fallout. They argue that, given the nature of Pakistani state and its institutions, India needs to be very cautious both in its approach and strategy regarding Pakistan. Because of these conflicting views, the incumbent government in New Delhi appears to be somewhat less enthusiastic at the moment. General elections in India are around the corner due to which the ruling dispensation as well as the opposition parties does not want to take any risks. However, once the new government takes oath of office in New Delhi, steps would most certainly be taken up to fast-track the Kartarpur process.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

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