



Corridor Of Uncertainty

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(This editorial is based on the article “Corridor Of Uncertainty” which appears in The Indian Express on 4th December 2018.)

Peace in the Indian subcontinent presumes harmony between India and Pakistan.

More than 40 years of efforts at regionalism has been held hostage by the hostility of the two, with the other countries of the world watching suspiciously.

Both the countries talk about peace, trade and people-to-people contacts, things which had not turned into reality till today. **The abuse hurled by the establishments of each side is nothing but a populist political tool that distracts the public from pressing matters of growth, equity, democracy, and accountability.** It also hides the fact that the cost of maintaining massive militaries in each country undermines the efforts for ensuring social justice.

The inauguration of the Kartarpur corridor is a positive step, but whether this could be the means to the end called ‘peace between India and Pakistan’, remains an open question.

India and Pakistan had entered into an agreement on pilgrimages in 1974 under which both sides issue visitor visas for a handful of shrines on either side. The Kartarpur visa-free corridor is only for Indians. But it will require a separate agreement for operationalization, which will involve complex negotiations given the security ramifications.

Background

- As mentioned above, a protocol constituting an agreement between India and Pakistan on the visit to Religious Shrines was signed on 1974.

- **Both the countries had agreed on the following principle for facilitating visits to such shrines:**
 - That such visits from one country to the other should be allowed without discrimination as to religion or sect.
 - The list of shrines to be visited were to be finalized through correspondence.
 - The agreed list is enlarged from time to time by mutual agreement.

Kartarpur visa-free Corridor

- In terms of history, Pakistan has never had any claim on Punjab, unlike Kashmir, which remains an unresolved territorial dispute. Therefore, fewer chances of further disturbances exist for the construction of this corridor.
- Given its easy logistics, the 7-km-long Kartarpur corridor is a low-hanging fruit and yet serves as a meaningful confidence-building measure.
- **The significance of the Kartarpur Corridor is that the demand for it from the Sikh community was so great that neither the Indian nor Pakistani side wanted to be seen as opposing it. This is also probably the first instance of the two sides set aside mutual hostility to bow to the will of the people.**
- The initiative can also become a template for cross-border exchanges based on faith, which could provide relief for many communities such as Kashmiri Pandits, who have for long asked access to visit the Sharda Peeth in the Neelum Valley in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir or the Sufis in Pakistan who wish to visit the dargah of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer, Rajasthan or the Sikhs in India and Pakistan wanting to visit important shrines on both sides of the border.

Challenges

- **The first challenge is to sustain and keep the idea of the corridor alive beyond 2019.**
- The potential of South Asia for sustained high growth has been blocked by the tightened national borders, with India playing its part by building barbed wire fences on the Pakistan frontier for security.
- There is concern among skeptics that India will not be able to control security in the corridor. Also, there are chances that the opening of the corridor may lead to the revival of the Khalistan movement.
- Even more, will depend on how the two governments manage their relationship in a way that avoids making pilgrims a pawn in bilateral tensions.

- Apart from the obvious politico-diplomatic issues, logistical challenges are also one of the trials this corridor would face. For example, there is a need to build two bridges, one across the fast flowing Ravi, and another, across a seasonal tributary of the Ravi, Begh Baein. The Ravi is about 1,200 ft and the Begh Bain about 400 ft in breadth. Both are in Pakistan. Pakistan will have to find a way to bridge the two water bodies before next year's celebrations to mark the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. No details are available on how it will go about doing this.

Way Forward

- **India, as the more stable democracy, should inculcate empathy for the neighbour,** it should recognize the difference between the Pakistani state and its people, the latter struggling against extremism, military supremacy and state-centralism all at one go.
- **As the historical 'connectivity' of the Subcontinent crumbled after Partition, it created massive a dysfunction as economies of scale and production chains were disrupted.** This is a chance to restore that.
- The goal of the future should be to learn to compartmentalize one's perceptions of the 'other', that Pakistan is made up of its state and its people just as India to is made up of its state and its people. The mutual integration has to do with conflating the two, state apparatus and citizenry, as one.
- **India should, therefore, build on the leap of faith that it took on the Kartarpur corridor.** For starters, both countries must relax visa norms so, that there is more people-to-people interaction across the border. An agreement for this already exists since 2012. All that needs to be done is to implement it. A large part of the failure of the two countries to come out of the holes into which they have dug themselves in owes to the vacuum created in citizen interaction. It is time to undo that.
- **Moreover, South Asia must be understood as a project for social justice, to be achieved through economic rationalisation, sub-regional interactions and reduced military budgets – and open borders such as exists between Nepal and India.**
- Everything is now going to depend on how quickly India and Pakistan act on their

respective commitments.

