



GUEST COLUMN | *Dr. Pramod Kumar*

Complexities of cooperation

East Punjab and West Punjab: Complex responses point to complex realities

Nearly a decade ago, Pakistan was ruled by a democratically elected government and a visit to Islamabad received warm Panjabi cultural hugs. It also witnessed India's defeat against Sri Lanka in the 1996 World Cup cricket final held in Lahore manifesting in Panjabi Pakistani friends hugging Sri Lankans and cold shouldering us Panjabis. A decade later US invasion of Iraq provoked solidarity among South Asians including Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans.

These three contextual responses are pointers towards the existence of complex realities. The first situation signifies cultural bondage and the quest for sharing the cultural reservoir and resources. Shahid Shadad Kaiser, niece of Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan summed up this bondage as "Pakistan is the motherland and India the land of the forefathers which tugs a heart. Generations on both sides of the borders have been braving and living with a constant yearning for the roots."

The second context was an expression of Pakistanis and Sri Lankans highlighting their perception of India being a 'hegemonic regional power'. Hence the political hugs.

The third situation exemplifies the developing countries' sense of powerlessness in the face of the USA's authoritarian misadventures. Hence, the survival hugs.

These complex responses have been articulated during the recent World Panjabi Congress also. For example, the noted

Pakistani columnist, Afzal Tauseef, observed, "we are people bonded by tradition and culture and should guard against any fresh attempts to divide and rule... that the imperialist forces will decide the future of Kashmir and not its people." In other words, political establishments in India and Pakistan are blurring the real issues like poverty, unemployment, equitable distribution of wealth and overemphasizing contentious issues to consolidate their power. Not only this, they have provided their own meaning to 'national interest', 'threat' and 'security'. For them national interest is to protect physical territory and not political and economic sovereignty of the people. And 'threat' is perceived from the weak (i.e. from each other) and not from the powerful regimes that keep the developing countries on the margins of politics and economy. And security is sought from military deployment rather than strengthening democracy.

Another view in the World Panjabi Congress was expressed by Mr. Parvez Ilahi, Chief Minister of Pakistan Punjab. He said that 'the two countries had fought wars without considering the fact that the basic cause was Kashmir. Trade could be initiated only if the core issue was resolved.' But at the same time he reinforced the existing cultural reservoir and made an effort to appropriate the cultural capital. The appropriation of Panjabi cultural capital by the political establishment is a shift from the earlier stance whereby the political establishments in Pakistan and India misappropriated the negative cultural reservoir which presented each other as villains depicted through writing of history. However, both the political establishments continue to hypersensitive on issues relating to territorial nationalism including softening of borders. To illustrate, both the Indian and the Pakistani

establishments present Kashmir as an Islamic Jihad rather than a movement for the preservation of the ethno-cultural identity of Kashmir. The fear is that this would in turn result in restructuring the territorial boundaries of the two countries.

The signals are significant. Therefore, Punjab-Punjab co-operation is a derivative of South-Asian confederation. There is a qualitative shift in the political discourse from appropriation of culture of violence to culture of peace.

Further there is unevenness in the political response between the political establishments of two Punjabs. The Pakistan Panjabi political establishment is a dominant nationality and tends to be the articulator of Pakistan's national interest. It is precisely for this reason that their response to the culture of Punjab is emotional, but to issues like Kashmir it is political. Whereas the political establishment in Indian Punjab is regional in character and therefore, its response is specific to issues relating to the Panjabi language, Panjabi peasantry and promotion of Punjab-Punjab trade co-operation. To quote the Chief Minister of Indian Punjab, 'It is not my intention to confine confluence only to cultural and spiritual spheres, but to material well being. The creation of material wealth has to be blended with the creation of the wealth of knowledge. We have in both Punjabs a reservoir of knowledge which if shared can restore the centrality of this vibrant human settlement, great human

minds, aggressive peasantry and enterprising entrepreneurs." Whereas, the Pakistan Punjabis couch their response by emphasizing cultural interaction and not trade co-operation which is to be resolved by the national leadership. This also explains why Panjabi as a language is not used for transacting legislative and government business in Pakistan Punjab.

Having understood this difference in the two political establishments, it is worthwhile to point out that the process of cultural interaction is an insurance against escalation of conflict between the two countries. Historically, the initiative was taken away from the people and their participation in the resolution of conflicts was symbolic and their role was marginalized. This will also reduce hypersensitivity of the political establishment and the people on territorial nationalism which in turn has been blurring the cultural homogeneity and economic interdependence. Therefore, there is need for empowering the people to create conditions for democratization of the polity, decentralization of power and operational federation within their own countries.

These interventions cannot be regional and national. To begin with it has to start with carving out a South Asian confederation to compete globally and evolve regional institutional mechanisms for sharing human and economic resources with each other.

(The writer is the Director, Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh)