

India-Pakistan Peacemaking: Beyond Populist Religious Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT The Kartarpur corridor, inaugurated in November 2019, is regarded as an important peacemaking measure between India and Pakistan. Various international organisations have welcomed the corridor, including the United Nations. Drawing from history, this brief argues that opening a pilgrimage corridor or renovating a place of worship, and other such attempts to bridge India and Pakistan using religious sentiment inevitably fail to address the deep-rooted suspicions and anxieties between them. The brief suggests deeper engagement, including fostering a sustained academic cooperation between the two countries to harness their shared culture and knowledge. These suggestions may also prove beneficial in finding possible answers to the long-term disputes between the two neighbours.

Attribution: Hemant Rajopadhye, "India-Pakistan Peacemaking: Beyond Populist Religious Diplomacy," *ORF Issue Brief No. 343*, March 2020, Observer Research Foundation.

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INTRODUCTION

On 9 November 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed Pakistan's decision to open up the Kartarpur corridor, while inaugurating its Indian side at Dera Baba Nanak in Gurdaspur. His Pakistani counterpart, Imran Khan, did the same across the border on the same day, at the newly constructed Darbar Sahib complex at Kartarpur in Shakargarh, Narowal District, part of Pakistan's Punjab province. During the inauguration of the corridor, Prime Minister Modi thanked his Pakistani counterpart for "understanding and for respecting the sentiments of India and working on it positively,"¹ and compared the event to the historic fall of the Berlin wall in 1991.²

The idea of opening a religious corridor was raised by the former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, with his Pakistani counterpart PM Nawaz Sharif, during the famous Lahore bus summit, in 1999. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also put the idea forward during a speech in Amritsar, in 2004. Many years later, it is significant that the Kartarpur corridor was opened despite the high-voltage tensions that arose after the Pulwama incident^a and the August 2019 abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution of India, which gave special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir.^b

Despite the optimistic reactions, however, the Indian government has already indicated some security concerns with the corridor, suggesting that it could be used by either Pakistan-sponsored Khalistani terrorists to brainwash Indian pilgrims,³ or by other extremist groups as well.⁴ India's suspicions can be traced to certain historical events and statements made by senior Pakistani officials: During Gen. Parvez Musharraf's tenure as the president of Pakistan, Lt. General Javed Nasir—a hardliner Islamist general and the chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) who was the chairperson of the Pakistan Sikh Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee—publicly said that the Sikhs' demands for a separate identity is legitimate, and they must be respected by the Indian government.⁵ According to some reports,⁶ Gen. Nasir believed that Khalistan could be achieved through "peaceful means."

Analysts⁷ have often highlighted how—when it comes to peacemaking projects with India—Pakistan's political leadership conveniently adopts double standards in the face of threats and severe criticism from fundamentalist groups within their country.

PROBLEMS WITH RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY

Pakistan's efforts to respect its diplomatic commitment to open the Kartarpur corridor

a "Jaish Terrorists attack CRPF convoy in Kashmir, kill at least 40 personnel" Pulwama terror attack: What happened on Feb 14 and how India responded" in *The Economics Times*, 16 February, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/37-crpf-jawans-martyred-in-ied-blast-in-jks-pulwama/articleshow/67992189.cms>

b On 5 August, 2019, the Home Minister Amit Shah introduced 'the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Bill, 2019' in Rajya Sabha to transform the status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir to two separate Union Territories, namely Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and Union Territory of Ladakh. See, "No Article 370 for Jammu and Kashmir, historic move by Modi Govt" in *India Today*, 5 August, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/kashmir-unrest-amit-shah-parliament-reservation-bill-amendment-artcle-370-1577275-2019-08-05>

have set in motion discussions in India regarding how to build on this positive sentiment and respond with a similar peacemaking gesture. Various groups across political leanings have come up with a number of options that, according to them, could reciprocate Pakistan's "Kartarpur diplomacy". One of the prominent options under discussion is the renovation and opening of the Sharada corridor, which will allow Hindus and Sikhs to visit the Sharada temple^c in Neelum Valley, located in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. According to official reports and media sources, India has already sent an official proposal to Pakistan in this regard; this is believed to have been received positively by their counterparts across the border.⁸

Religion and culture are often seen to be at the core of social consciousness in the Indian subcontinent. The word 'religion' has its roots in the Latin word *religionem* which means 'respect for what is regarded sacred, or respect for gods'.⁹ However, the institutionalisation and politicisation of faith has made religion one of the major political forces to divide society. This has a long history: faith and spirituality were politicised and used as weapons by the erstwhile colonial masters of the subcontinent; the effects of these tactics ultimately fostered hatred between Hindus and Muslims—the two major religious groups in the area—and led to the implementation of the Two-Nation Theory, which resulted in the bloody partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Friendship efforts between the two South

Asian neighbours often fail due to the hatred and deep-rooted distrust sown, which has only gained strength over time owing to the presence of hardline fundamentalists in both countries.

It is widely known that Pakistan is going through a massive crisis on several fronts. The biggest dilemma that confronts Pakistan—even after 70 years of its birth as a separate Islamic nation—is its identity crisis. It is common belief that "the erosion of Jinnah's pluralist and secular vision of Pakistan has been due either to a state centralization contemptuous of ethnic diversity or to state-driven Islamization intent on disciplining, if not marginalizing, religious difference."¹⁰ This process of Islamisation can be traced back to the religious leaders of the Indian Islamic sphere in the 18th century—leaders like Sayyid Ahmed from Rae Bareilly (1786-1832) and Ismail Dehlavi (1779-1831) felt the need for "purifying the Islamic faith" and purging it of the local faith, that is, Hinduism. These early communal enterprises slowly translated into the synthesis of the Two-Nation Theory, the founding philosophy of Pakistan. This founding philosophy has haunted the national identity of the state since its creation; it has translated into a firm belief that Pakistan has to be imagined in negative terms—as not a part of the civilisational (Hindu) 'Indianness.'

Be it the Kartarpur corridor or the proposed Sharada corridor, people-oriented peacemaking efforts are evidently centred on

c Sharada temple or Sharada Peetham is a Hindu temple attributed to the goddess Sarasvati (the Hindu goddess of knowledge), and one of the foremost ancient center of traditional learning, located in the Neelum Valley in PoK. It is regarded as one of the three holiest pilgrimage sites for the Kashmiri Pandits. According to legend, Adi Shankaracharya, the foremost spiritual scholar and leader (8th Century A.D.) ascended the highest throne of wisdom, i.e. Sarvajna-peetham (the throne of omniscience) at this Sharada temple.

the religious sentiments of significant communities in both the countries. While such projects have often been seen as a barometer of India-Pakistan relations in their early phase, they have eventually suffered from political manipulation or have simply been abandoned, owing to threats from fundamentalist forces or non-state actors.

In recent history, the renovation project of the Katas Raj temple complex, located at Chakwal in Pakistan's Punjab province, is another useful example of a failed peacemaking enterprise based on religious sentiment.¹¹ The then prime minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, called the widely celebrated temple restoration "a symbolic gesture to reach out to the Muslim nation's minority communities and also soften the country's hard-line image abroad."¹²

Despite the good intentions and positive signs of progress, however, the project is stalled. A similar case was witnessed at Nankana sahib, where a mob attacked the sacred shrine of Gurudwara Janam Asthan, the birthplace of Guru Nanak.¹³ These incidents show that there is a need to go beyond such cosmetic measures and find more holistic solutions that propagate a sense of social conscience and responsibility across all the sectors of society in the subcontinent. A populist and superficial use of religious symbolism to propagate the message of peace—on the backdrop of bitter enmity between the countries—will only fail unless the root causes of identity crisis is eradicated.

Authorities should take recourse to some alternative measures. They may not give immediate results but are eventually likely to facilitate the long-term sustainability of

peacemaking efforts that are primarily based on religious sentiments and communal identities. One of the few long-term options, which could help find a common ground and eventually pave the way for peace in the subcontinent, would be to explore practical and positive measures that are not enveloped in political grandstanding.

SHARED KNOWLEDGE AS PEACE INSTRUMENT

According to Punjab University's library website,¹⁴ the university has a collection of 8,671 manuscripts of texts composed in "Hindi and Sanskrit" languages. The library's Sanskrit collection owes significantly to the efforts of Dr. A.C. Woolner, who was a Professor of Sanskrit. When the Oriental College Library was merged with the Punjab University Library in 1913, his Sanskrit manuscript collection in the former also became a part of Punjab University's library. The website states that the "collection has 9,075 manuscripts in Sanskrit, Hindi, Prakrit, Sharada, Andhra and Tamil languages and scripts. This collection also has more than 2,000 palm leaf manuscripts." The first volume of the *Catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts in Panjab University*¹⁵ highlights the humble beginnings of the library's manuscript collection—Pandit Kashinath Kunte, a Marathi-speaking Sanskritist first acquired around half a dozen manuscripts in the 1880s from libraries in Lahore, Gujranwala, and Delhi. Subsequently, the collection grew during Dr. Woolner's tenure.

After exploring the manuscript library online and corresponding with Pakistani scholars, this author has learnt that the

collection comprises the manuscripts of Vedic Samhitas, such as the Kapishtala Samhita of Yajurveda and the Jaiminiya Samhita of Samaveda. The Jaiminiya Samhita is considered important by Vedic scholars, because it comprises various *ganas* (musical melodies) that have not been found in other manuscripts so far. The two manuscripts of the Richakas in this collection, entered under *Prayashchitta* section of Dharmashastra, are also of immense significance because certain sections of the lost Katha Brahmana of Yajurveda can be found in these manuscripts. These Richakas are missing in all the other collective manuscript catalogues present in India and even in the libraries at Oxford, Tübingen, Paris and Berlin.¹⁶

Another important manuscript in the collection is the Venkata Madhava Bhashya, the rarest and only complete copy of the commentary on Rigveda. Besides this treasure trove of manuscripts, many palm-leaf manuscripts of commentaries on the Brahmanas—Vedic liturgical texts—are also available in the collection in the Punjab University Library. The Grihya Samskaras and their source, the Grihya Sutras, are considered to be an indivisible part of the Vedic household ritual systems. The Baudhayana Grihya Sutra is regarded as one of the most important Grihya Sutras of all. The manuscript of one of its commentaries that is catalogued in this collection is perhaps the only manuscript available so far.

Along with these important works, many more unique manuscripts in the fields of Mimamsa (ritual theory), Tantra, Shaivism, Kashmir Shaivism, grammar, and linguistics are also part of this collection. The second

volume of the catalogue of Sanskrit manuscripts available in the Punjab University Sanskrit collection¹⁷ mentions hundreds of other manuscripts, encompassing a wide range of subjects such as Nyaya (Indian logic), Vaisheshika (a discipline developed by Maharshi Kanada, intertwining Indian physics, epistemology, and soteriology), Samkhya, Yoga, Vedanta, Sikhism, Puranas, Gita, Bhakti, Kamashastra (erotica), Smritis (law books), Shilpashastra (architecture), and narrative literature along with a significant volume of Jaina and Buddhist manuscripts.

The Woolner collection contains information about similar collections of Sanskrit manuscripts at the D.A.V. College in Lahore. Apart from these, records also show that of the 27,000 manuscripts in the Ganj Bakhsh library of Islamabad,¹⁸ 10 percent of them are written in non-Persian, non-Arabic languages; though there is no precise mention of manuscripts in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, or other indigenous languages such as Punjabi or Khadi Boli, there is a huge possibility of finding manuscripts in these languages.

This author has personally recorded numerous references of Maharashtrian and Gujarati Sanskritists who have spent several decades of their lives in cities such as Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi, and Gujranwala, learning Sanskrit and other linguistic and ritualistic traditions. There is also a likelihood of finding massive Jaina manuscript collections in these cities as traces of the Jaina trader community and Jaina temples are visible even after 70 years of Partition.¹⁹ Apart from the classical Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina texts, there have been hundreds of texts produced representing the syncretic literary

traditions promoted by the Natha Jogis, Sufis, and local bards of Punjab, Rajasthan and Sindh; if procured and studied keenly, these could hold great potential to turn around South Asian historical discourse.

Despite this wealth of knowledge, according to reports, “today the way history is being taught in Pakistani schools is nothing but political indoctrination on the basis of separate identity of the Muslims and the Hindus.”²⁰ This can be described as a ‘hate Hindu, hide history’ approach, which reinforces the typical enemy images of India and excludes the many shared South Asian traditions that depict points of harmony between the two countries. Scholars increasingly hold the view “that in Social Studies and Pakistan Studies classes, students don’t learn history. They are required to read a carefully selected collection of falsehoods, fairytales and plain lies. State-sponsored textbooks illustrate appropriation of history to reinforce a national philosophy or ideology; historical interpretations are therefore predetermined, unassailable and concretized.”²¹ Extensive discussions in some reports and publications²² indicate that this is a recent development; the pre-Islamic heritage and history of today’s Pakistan had, indeed, been a part of the curriculum before 1975. However, it has been systematically removed from the syllabus over the decades.

The historical significance of pre-Islamic history and heritage²³ has thus been intentionally obliterated from the cultural consciousness of the average Pakistani citizen. This national amnesia about Pakistan’s ancient and medieval pre-Islamic/non-Islamic past has resulted in the negligence of

thousands of Sanskrit and Prakrit manuscripts and inscriptions attributed to Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist legacies.

The demonisation of Hindus and Hinduism²⁴ and the deliberate detachment from the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain past of the region has resulted in the lack of willingness to pursue the study of ancient Sanskrit and Prakrit languages along with the academic study of all other non-Islamic cultures. Lahore-based, independent journalist Sehyr Mirza highlights that the department of Hindi was only reopened at the Oriental College, Lahore during the regime of Zia-Ul-Haq in 1983. Currently, the college offers a certificate course in Hindi. Mirza further notes that several books in the library of the Hindi department were brought from the Sanskrit department, which was closed in 1947.²⁵

Several Pakistani universities have been engaging with various Western universities on projects dealing with the Gandharan Buddhist civilisation. However, to decipher the epigraphs from the Gandharan region, it is necessary to have knowledge of classical Indic languages and their various scripts. As several Pakistani historians, archaeologists, and scholars point out, Prof. Ahmad Hasan Dani (now deceased) was the last Pakistani archaeologist who was well-versed in the classical languages and ancient scripts.²⁶ The department of Archaeology at the Punjab University, Lahore, recently organised a seminar on Gandhara civilisation to pay homage to Prof. Dani, where several Japanese scholars, who could read the ancient scripts, were invited. The classical Art Centre at the Oxford University has been running a project called ‘Gandhara Connections’ wherein one of

the Indian scholars has been a part of the advisory committee. Today, because of their lack of knowledge of Sanskrit, Pakistani academics have to rely solely on their Western colleagues to decipher and understand the written content on stone relics, coins, and manuscripts.

In such situations, the governments or the official academic authorities from both the countries should come together to build academic cooperation and start academic exchange programmes that might lead to the common language-script trainings. Such programmes would not only enable the scholars to learn the ancient languages and scripts, but also help identify and overcome the historical biases that have been propagated over the past decades.

CONCLUSION

Populist projects based on religious diplomacy, such as opening up the Kartarpur corridor or renovating the Katas Raj temple, invite a lot of media attention; in most cases, however, they largely create controversies (or in some cases, temporary romantic fervour) based on falsehoods and ignorance. In such a situation, academic projects and exchanges between the two nations will aid the academic communities in both countries in creating more constructive responses to proposals such as the Kartarpur corridor. These academic projects will also help Pakistani society to come to terms with its identity crisis. Importantly, with such projects, the Pakistani government could create a sense of security amongst the Hindu minority in Pakistan, which would help improve its global image with respect to minority issues.

The current Indian government is led by a party that adheres to the political ideology of Hindutva.²⁷ The party leadership is seen to have exhibited great pride in the glorious civilisational heritage of India. The ruling dispensation has also shown its commitment towards the preservation and betterment of Indian heritage in India and in what is being identified as 'Greater India' (other South Asian countries). Some elements from the parent organisation of the ruling party also dream of what they imagine as 'Akhand Bharata,' that is, an unbroken, pre-partition India; this, however, is a foregone impracticality. Instead, for the betterment of the civilisational heritage of the 'Bharatavarsha,'—the Indian subcontinent—both India and Pakistan should take inspiration from the European agreement of not destroying the centres of education in case of armed hostilities and join hands to undertake constructive efforts towards reviving their civilisational heritage to promote long-term peace in the region.

As prescribed in an earlier ORF paper²⁸ by this author, the governments of both the countries, while looking forward to celebrating the 75th anniversary of their independence, should dedicate the year 2022 to the rediscovery of their shared culture and history. The Kartarpur corridor has become a milestone in the bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan, despite mounting tensions following the Pulwama attack and the abrogation of Article 370. This development has proved how despite adversity, political intent, willingness, and constructive action can pave the way for meaningful academic exchanges between Indian and Pakistani historian communities and institutions.

The prime minister of India has gained popularity and stature as a mature leader and is known for his respect and curiosity about ancient India's religious and cultural legacy, especially the fast-disappearing remnants of Sanskrit literature. Even his political rivals have come to admire his skills as a smart organiser and campaigner. Therefore, it would be sensible for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to propose a joint celebration of India and Pakistan's 75th Independence Day and dedicate the year to the rediscovery of the countries' shared heritage, culture, and history. This will not only set a new benchmark in the chaotic history of the subcontinent but also add

momentum to the fractured peacemaking process between the two neighbours. The Kartarpur diplomacy sets the stage for giving shape to such a mutually beneficial initiative.

The future of the Kartarpur corridor—or for that matter, any such efforts towards rapprochement—cannot be predicted for long-term sustainability. Even the composite dialogue process between the two countries has been brittle, prone to multiple fractures and collapsing at the slightest provocation. Therefore, the political leadership must seize the momentum created by the Kartarpur corridor breakthrough to kickstart a constructive academic programme. [ORF](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

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26. Though we do not have any official accounts about Professor Dani, from the personal interactions with my historian and archaeologist friends and colleagues, working at the Oxford University and in some of the prime Pakistani academic institutions, I have learnt that late Profssor Dani was the last scholar well versed in Sanskrit and other classical Indic languages. As I am told, Professor Mohammad Naseem Khan, at the University of Peshavar, is another widely acclaimed scholar who understands some Sanskrit and Pali. However, despite being a homeland

of the Gandharan civilisation, no Pakistani University offers a course for Sanskrit and Pali languages, without which the Gandharan heritage can not be studied.

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