

## **India-Pakistan Relations: Can Guru Nanak be a Factor of Peace?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Guru Nanak Dev was born in November, 1469. He grew up to be the founder of Sikhism along with other nine Gurus. It soon emerged as an independent faith, and instantly won many followers to its fold. Therefore, the purpose of this research paper will be to delve into Guru Nanak's role and appreciating his importance as far as bridging the wide gulf of enmity particularly between India and Pakistan and in the wider South Asia region in general. As all his life he focussed on fostering amity, peace, brotherhood, tolerance and harmony among people of various backgrounds, his teachings therefore promise to have all the necessary ingredients of peace which is currently wanting in the region.

**Key words:** India, Pakistan, Guru Nanak, South Asia, Peace & Conflict

### **Introduction**

South Asia is a diverse region with people of different faiths, religions, races, languages and cultures inhabiting it. The countries comprising it have often found it extremely difficult and problematic to reconcile these demarcating factors within their respective constitutions because of the multi ethnic, racial and religious character of their societies. As a result, there have been both intra as well as interstate conflicts in the region often having ramifications across the borders. This is particularly true in case of India and Pakistan which have fought several wars since their coming into existence in 1947. Partition did irreparable damage to the old bonds and ties between people of different faiths that had been living here for centuries. Since their birth, the relations between the two have seen many ups and downs. For most part of their existence, they have been bitter rivals of each other because the roots of this bitterness are deeply entrenched in the national psyche of the two nations. This has led some scholars to characterise this state of affairs between the two as “enduring rivalry” (T. V. Paul, 2005). Having lived through difficult times, the two countries cannot afford to live in perpetual animosity. Both of them contain some of the world's poorest people. Given that, it seems absurd on their part to spend a major percentage of their annual budgets on defence and military build-up (SIPRI, 2020). The leadership in both countries, having woken

up to this reality, have been trying to normalise the relations with the shared dream of making their respective countries in particular and South Asian in general as regions of peace and prosperity. Therefore, in the context of India and Pakistan in which majority of the people identify themselves with different religions, it can be argued that religion and the religious figures can be a binding factor between the people. However, they can also be a divisive factor as is borne out by the circumstances in which the two came into being. Thus, the leadership in both the countries have to cautiously use and promote religious or faith-based diplomacy which means “using faith to bring people and nations together” (Raja Mohan, 2018), as a new strategy in normalising their relations.

On India and Pakistan’s relations, a lot of literature has been written touching different aspects of the two countries including religion. However, Sikh religion and its founder, Guru Nanak, which promise to have the vital ingredients for bringing about peace which is currently wanting in the region, have not been given sufficient attention as far as mending the relations between the two is concerned. Besides Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism are the other major religions whose followers are found in the region. Followers of these faiths, in the South Asian region are scattered disproportionately across different regions constituting majority in one country while a minority in the other. Further, religious places of some groups are located in different countries than the one in which the religious group is found. For example, Sikh population which is mainly concentrated in Indian state of Punjab have some of their most revered religious sites located in the Muslim majority Pakistan (Goraya, 2017). Similarly, in Hindu majority India there are several places of worship which are sacred to Muslims living in Pakistan (Goraya, 2017). These religious places continue to be visited by thousands of devotees every year. Therefore, such location of religious sites of varied followers of different faiths can arguably be an important factor in making the relations between two countries more cordial. It has the potential of making more people to people contacts possible. Hence, religious diplomacy can be used as a new tool of peace strategy between countries and their populace. As this paper is essentially concerned with Guru Nanak Dev and Sikhism, therefore what is written of them may be to a great extent true of other faiths practised in the region.

### **Contextualising the role of religion and religious figures in India-Pakistan scenario**

Religion has been a diplomatic tool in South Asia since the political history of the region. Although it has a negative connotation of being the opium of the people, religion has been vital to the lives of the people. There is a growing tendency in the region, or for that matter in the world that people often try to identify themselves with the religion they profess to follow. Religion therefore is important as a key source of identity (Haynes, 2009) for the people not only across the world but in South Asia also. Pakistan and Bangladesh came into being largely because

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of the religious factors. Both Islam and Hinduism continue to play an important role in the India-Pakistan relations.

Adherents of a particular faith normally regard their chosen religious expressions and symbols as both benevolent and inspiring (Haynes, 2009). However, one must not lose sight of the fact that religious faiths and the religious hatreds and differences are sometimes linked to violence and conflict both between and within religious groups which often spill across the borders (Haynes, 2009). In the South Asia region itself, religion is central to some of the ongoing conflicts like Kashmir, Afghanistan among others. Besides, there is also a looming threat of religious extremism in the region which is real and well documented. On the contrary, it can be argued that religion can also be a source to achieve greater social cohesion, and a stronger force than any other material incentives. It also has the potential to prove better at regulating social behaviour of individuals than either laws or physical force. To fight The British, Mahatma Ghandi used non-violent means of protest which had their origin in religious beliefs. Although there is no denying the fact that religion in many parts of the world is a main factor in many violent conflicts in the world. However, what are often overlooked are the opportunities to employ the assets of religious leaders and religious institutions to promote peace. Traditional diplomacy has been mostly lax in its disregard of the religious approach to promoting peace. Religious approaches or more specifically religious diplomacy aimed at making peace possible do not provide an ultimate remedy, but can greatly supplement other efforts directed toward the same end (Smock, 1989). Gerrie ter Haar suggests that religion is neither inherently good nor bad for peace, and that its influence is undeniable (Busuttill, 2005). Peace with religion, then, emphasises promoting the common principles present in every major religion. Major religions including Sikhism share a broadly similar set of scriptural and spiritual values and world views and this possibly reinforces their capacity to deliver positive contributions in bringing warring nations together. Therefore, it should be used extra cautiously so that it can be capitalised to not only minimize the sources of conflict but also as a vehicle for bringing about peace as far as India and Pakistan are concerned.

### **Guru Nanak dev and Sikhism: Role in India-Pakistan relations**

Sikhism has been lately in limelight in the context of India-Pakistan relations when the two counties agreed to build a visa free corridor for Sikhs in India to visit their pilgrimage centre in Pakistan. It was inaugurated by Imran Khan government in November 2018. The Sikh religion is one of the most recent religions of the world, which originated in the late fifteenth century and took two almost two centuries to ultimately crystallise in early eighteenth century. The total population of Sikhs worldwide is estimated to be 27 million or 0.39 per cent of the world population with their presence in 34 countries. Sikhs account for 1.9 per cent of the population in India with more than seventy per cent living in Punjab, a state in North India (C. Singh, 2016), while Pakistan is home to approximately 20,000

Sikhs, though the real figure is unknown, as the group was excluded from the most recent population census (Toppa, 2017). Most of the religious texts are in Punjabi, a language spoken in India and Pakistan. There is limited material available in English on Sikh religion and particularly on its impact on the peace process between India and Pakistan. In this article an attempt has been made to explore its significance as a tool of religious diplomacy or “faith in action” which has been defined as “an effort by the worldwide religious community of many denominations to teach (or remind) people of the world that religion and belief systems are founded on peace and love rather than violence and war” (Choudhary, 2013).

When India achieved independence from The British in 1947, Punjab had to be divided into two-one part was given to Pakistan and the other to India. Majority of the Sikh populace were uprooted and had to migrate to India in hostile circumstances with no resources as they had to abandon gurdwaras, property, and businesses that were occupied, confiscated, or destroyed (Toppa, 2017). Most of them settled down in the Indian state of Punjab. It is Punjab that mainly had to bear the brunt of partition. This large-scale displacement was followed by three wars and continuous skirmishes across the border with Pakistan. The situation is same today even after seventy years of independence. It is therefore in this context that Guru Nanak, who is equally revered in both the nations for his noble ideals can be a messiah of peace and has the potential to cement the bonds which existed previously between the people of the two nations. Therefore, in order to restore peace between India and Pakistan and in the wider South Asian region, political leadership need not look farther afield. It only has to revisit the basic values and teachings advocated by Guru Nanak and subsequently by his disciples for lessons to be learned. The Gurus preached and promoted compassion and sympathy so that human tragedy was replaced by human harmony through the universal human service and fraternity. Many religious traditions including Sikhism also have, therefore core values which theoretically can help in the development of a peaceful South Asia.

In this rapidly globalising world, the two nations should tear down the walls of hostility, animosity and blind walls of nationalism to undermine each other. These manmade hindrances to their collective progress need to be replaced by honest and earnest initiatives which can lessen the hatred between the two. Keeping this in mind, Sikh religious festivals and opening up of religious places are such two initiatives which need to be given priority. C. Raja Mohan writes if there is one place ripe for quick advances in bilateral relations, it is Punjab. The pent-up demands for cross-border commercial cooperation and people-to-people contact is immense in the Punjab, which has borne so much of the Partition’s tragic burden. If there is political will, a lot of steps-relating to religious tourism, overland commerce, cross-border trade in electricity and hydrocarbons-can be taken” (Raja Mohan, 2018). They have the potential to bring the people together and reduce the bitterness and animosity between them. Therefore, religious

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tourism and festivals are the two areas where the two countries can make a lot of progress in normalising their relations for the time being till the two countries can make atmosphere viable to resolve the outstanding issues.

Guruparabs which are specific to Sikhism are celebrated to observe the anniversaries/events associated with the lives of the Gurus. People have been observing them with gaiety and enthusiasm since the time of Gurus who actively encouraged them. They are socio-religious festivities which can bring together Sikhs in significant numbers in the Gurdwaras across the border. Throughout the year six Guruparabs spread evenly are held.(C. Singh, 2016) As they are the occasion with the potential to get significant number of people to converge at any sacred place or monument. It therefore gives rise to vast commercial and activities which not only generate employment opportunities but also trade volumes (C. Singh, 2016).These festivals usually last over for a week. Both the countries should actively facilitate such kind of activities across the border. The travel restrictions should be eased by both the countries.

Opening of Sikh religious places for the devotees can be a significant confidence building measure between the two. Both of them should actively promote and encourage cross boarder religious pilgrimages. Whatever the relations between the two, faith-based pilgrimage should not be held hostage to the bitterness which characterises their relations. Their sanctity is beyond the mutual relations of the two. Goraya notes that there are numerous shrines on the Indo-Pak border which enjoy reverence beyond boundaries. He mentions, for example, Chimliyal on Jammu border and in Amritsar the tomb of Sheikh Brahm, contemporary of Guru (Goraya, 2017). Nationals and devotees from both the countries visit them frequently with religious zeal to pay homage at them. Kartarpur i.e. the creator's abode is the symbol of international harmony and is uniquely located where all the three major religions of South Asia traverse (C. Singh, 2016). It is located on the Indo-Pak border on the Pakistani side. It is the place where Baba Guru Nanak died in 1539. Keeping the holiness of the place in mind, it was the Benazir Bhutto's Government in Pakistan which understood the significance of Kartarpur in international relations in the year 1994 to grant a visa-less free corridor to Kartarpur shrine from the Indian border. It was finally given practical shape by Pakistan in November 2018. This move has showed that if the two countries are politically determined, the same faith-based peace maneuverers can be safely repeated in their other touchy problems between them, and finally pave way for the peace to triumph in the larger South Asian region. Therefore, both the countries should make all the possible arrangements to open up and maintain all those religious and historical monuments which lie across the border and make all the possible arrangements so that devotees from both the countries can move and travel effortlessly across the frontiers. The sanctity of these places should be respected irrespective of the relations between the two.

## **Conclusion**

This paper sought to give an overview of the role of Guru Nanak in the political relations between India and Pakistan and in South Asia. Some scholars maintain that Sikhism has been associated with violence because of Khalsa movement (P.

Singh & Fenech, 2014). However, it has been argued in the paper that Sikhism also has the constructive potential of bringing the communities belonging to diverse religious denominations together. It has been tried to show in this paper that the teachings associated with Sikhism and Guru Nanak can positively encourage people across different faiths to work sincerely for the advancement of the people living in the region which consequently can promote cordial and peaceful relations between the two countries in the long run. If religion is not politicised for dubious purposes, it can also develop feelings of brotherhood and amity in different groups and help in fostering long lasting peace among people and nations.

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