
Lahore Declaration February, 1999 A Major Initiative for Peace in South Asia

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The 11th May, 2013 elections have brought back the PML-N into power corridors of Pakistan. The return of Mian Nawaz Sharif as Prime minister has rekindled the hopes of renewal of peaceful relations between Pakistan and India. The history of bilateral relations between two neighbours has been marred by tensions and conflicts. The people on both sides are the real victims of the confrontation. Unresolved issue of Kashmir has been the root cause of the problem. Inflexibility in the behaviours of the leadership, allegations, and counter allegations have affected the achievement of cordiality in the relations. The nuclear explosions by Pakistan and India in May, 1998 had given many new intensified challenges of peace for both the countries. Clouds of war loomed high over the skies of South Asia. Peace seemed to be a forlorn hope. The Political leadership of Pakistan taking a major initiative, decided to start constructive dialogue with India over all outstanding issues. In the period from 1997 to 1999, some significant developments were made in the bilateral relations. Several Summit level meetings were convened on the margins of UN sessions and other regional and international conferences. Lahore Declaration of February 21, 1999, signed by the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, was one such opportunity which exhibited a serious commitment and resolve

for all important disputes on the part of political leadership of both the countries. The momentous event provided an important opportunity for talks on all the outstanding issues including Kashmir between the two countries at the highest political level. The real worth of the Lahore Declaration lies in the fact that a strong political commitment was made to normalize the strained relationship. Had the Lahore peace process not been derailed by the "Kargil Episode, there would have been greater prospects for durable peace"¹ in the region".

In March 1998, Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mian Nawaz Sharif, invited his Indian counterpart, Vajpayee, to Lahore for the talks to start the process of composite dialogue in March, 1998. The normalcy in relationship received a boost in February 1999, when Prime Minister Vajpayee came to Lahore and a Declaration was signed in a summit meeting along-with a Joint Statement and Memorandum of Understanding. Both countries committed themselves to 'intensify their efforts to resolve all issues, including the issue of Jammu & Kashmir'; to refrain from 'intervention and interference in each other's internal affairs'; and to take some confidence-building measures in the nuclear and conventional military fields.² The Joint Statement added "co-operation in information technology" and "holding consultations on easing the visa and trade flexibility".³

Background

During the campaign of General Elections of February, 1997 in Pakistan, Mian Nawaz Sharif, the leader of Pakistan Muslim League (N), categorically declared his wish for the normalization of relations with India as his top priority. He also expressed his determination that after coming to power, he would show flexibility in negotiations with India. He made clear statements and highlighted the significance of serious talks with India on Kashmir and a need to improve relations with India.⁴ He told Sartaj Aziz that he deliberately raised the issue in the campaign so that people

should accept his negotiations with India in the days to come. He also included it in his party's manifesto. He belongs to the Punjab province where the anti-Indian sentiments were rife than other parts of the country. His notions also carried weight due to his identification with Pakistan Muslim League, a right to Centre party which also harboured anti-India sentiments throughout its history. The economic initiative was mainly responsible for the paradigm shift in the approaches of Pakistan where the leadership was from economic background. He won a convincing electoral majority. Coming into power; he immediately focused his attention to resume talks with India.⁵ The then Prime Minister of India, H. D. Deve Gowda congratulated Mian Nawaz Sharif on his triumph. In his reply, the Prime Minister of Pakistan suggested to start talks at foreign secretary level between the two countries. They decided to take an initiative to resume the talks which had been stalled since 1994. Some international circles especially the U.S. also put their weight in favour of resumption of talks.⁶ In August, 1996, Frank Wisner, the US ambassador to India, while visiting Pakistan had indicated to Mian Nawaz Sharif that no talks with India can succeed without showing flexibility on both sides. The foreign secretaries of Pakistan and India, Shamshad Ahmad and Salman Haider respectively, held meetings in New Delhi from 28th to 31st March, 1997. On April 9, 1997, Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan held a breakfast session with Inder Kumar Gujral, the Minister for External Affairs of India. The meeting was held in the backdrop of the Non-Aligned Movement session in New Delhi. They decided to continue the dialogue and next meeting was scheduled to be held in Islamabad in June 1997.

In April, 1997, Inder Kumar Gujral became Prime Minister of India but his government lacked strong political hold over various farces in India. Meanwhile, Sharif had strengthened his position by introducing constitutional amendments and assuming more powers eventually. The strong domestic political position, gave more leverage to Mian Nawaz Sharif to move forward on the issue of relations with India. He greeted Gujral and emphasized the

need for enhancing the relationship between the two neighbours especially in the economic field. The Indian Prime Minister's response was very encouraging.⁷ On May 12th, 1997, Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif and Indian Premier Inder Kumar Gujral had a meeting on the margins of SAARC Summit at Male. It was another positive development in their relations. Both the leaders had agreed to develop an explicit programme for talks at Foreign Secretary level. A Hot Line between two Prime Minister Offices was also established subsequently. Foreign Secretaries of both countries met in Islamabad from June 19 to June 23 1997. As goodwill signs, both countries released fishermen and relaxed visa requirements for businessmen and artists and agreed to resolve all disputes including Jammu and Kashmir. The talks caused a thaw in the peace process between the two countries which proved to be a real breakthrough.⁸ Both countries worked out an eight point agenda and a mechanism of working groups was established; 1) Peace and Security, 2) Jammu and Kashmir, 3) Siachin, 4) Wullar Barrage, 5) Sir Creek, 6) Terrorism, 7) Commerce, 8) Promotion of friendly exchanges in various fields.⁹ As per schedule the foreign secretaries level talks were held in Islamabad from 19 to 23 June 1997.

Although Pakistan government was happy for inclusion of Jammu and Kashmir in the agenda of the talks but the Indian side always talked of the part of Kashmir under control of Pakistan.¹⁰ The two Prime Ministers again met on September 2, 1997 on the eve of UN General Assembly session. Mian Nawaz Sharif took a bold initiative to offer a no-war pact with India but eventually they agreed to explore ways and means to reduce tension between the two countries. However, the things could not produce the desired results.¹¹ The mechanism for integrated dialogue discontinued for a brief period on the fall of Gujral government in November 1997.

In March 1998, Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist right wing party, won the elections and Mr. Atal Behari

Vajpayee, the leader of BJP, was elected as Prime Minister of India after the general elections. The peace process between the two countries apparently caught in difficult time due to the right wing parties came to power in both countries in 1997-98. BJP had been an anti-Pakistan political party. The Muslim League had also a background of anti-Indian colour to its folds. However, the presence of right wing parties in the government in both countries proved beneficial for the peaceful relationship between the two neighbours. Due to their rightist background, and forward approach on bilateral relations, the political leadership of both the countries found a space to move forward on the path to normalization of relations. Mian Nawaz Sharif sent a message of greetings on Mr. Vajpayee's assumption of the Prime Minister's office. In his cordial response, the premier held that "two countries must not remain mired in the past, prisoners of old contentions", but should respond "positively and with energy to the call of the future and aspiration of our people especially the younger generation for a more cooperative relationship".¹² He pledged to go an "extra-mile" whenever there was a slightest opportunity of improving relations with Pakistan. The bold initiative and determination of two leaders of right wing parties in power provided the foundation of resumption of bilateral dialogues.¹³

The nuclear tests conducted by Pakistan and India in May 1998 rang the alarm bell all over the world. The international community at large urged both countries to resolve all outstanding disputes to avoid a nuclear conflict. In June 6 1998, the Security Council through its resolution No. 1172 urged Pakistan and India to remove tensions and to find solutions of those irritants including Kashmir. U.S.A. also used diplomatic channels to urge both the countries to resume bilateral talks to avoid any threat of nuclear war.¹⁴ The G-8 countries also expressed similar resolution in its meeting on June 12 1998. SAARC Summit Conference was held on July 29-30, 1998 at Colombo. Mian Nawaz Sharif held talks with Indian Prime

minister Vajpayee on the side lines of the Conference and again urged him to start fruitful dialogue. "Pakistan and India should engage in a sustained dialogue. Allow me to say that Pakistan is ready for immediate resumption of bilateral foreign secretary level talks on the basis of the understanding reached between Pakistan and India on 23rd June, 1997".¹⁵

The Pakistani Foreign Minister, Sartaj Aziz, called on Indian Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, in Durban, South Africa in the last week of August 1998 on the side lines of summit of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Both the countries agreed to revive the process of composite dialogue at the foreign secretaries' level. The formal announcement in this regard was made on September 23 1998 in a meeting between the two Prime Ministers in New York.¹⁶ "I am, however, happy to say that, in a meeting which concluded a short while ago, Prime Minister Vajpayee and I have reached an agreement to resume the dialogue with the commencement of foreign secretary level talks, which will address at the outset, the primary issues of peace, security, and Jammu and Kashmir,¹⁷ Mian Nawaz Sharif expressed his pledge to resolve problems with India through dialogue. In a nuclearized environment neither side could even contemplate the use of force. He regretted that the dialogue on eight item agenda with India they had agreed on June 23, 1997, could not make any headway. On the other hand, different version about modalities created problems but the two Prime Ministers, Nawaz Sharif and Vajpayee agreed to resume the dialogue at foreign secretary level. The two prime ministers agreed in their joint statement in New York on September 23rd, 1998, that an environment of durable peace would be meaningfully adhered in the supreme national interest of both the countries. They further agreed that a solution of all outstanding issues, including the Jammu and Kashmir dispute was essential for the purpose.¹⁸ The Nawaz-Vajpayee summit meeting of New York and the joint statement issued gave a positive boost to the bilateral relations and a ray of hope was visualized in the parleys between the foreign secretaries that took

place in Islamabad and New Delhi. In the follow up of the decisions taken up at the summit meeting at New York, the foreign secretaries held meetings on 15th-18th October, 1998 at Islamabad. They discussed the peace, security and Jammu and Kashmir issue. Next round of talks was followed in New Delhi in November, 1998 in which other six issues were discussed. Other prospects of bilateral trade and export of electricity to India were also discussed. In the talks, a commitment was expressed by both sides for making them meaningful.

The two Prime Ministers in their meeting at New York in September, 1998, had agreed to start a direct Bus Service between New Delhi and Lahore. The aim was to provide facility to the people coming across the border. The event was of a symbolic significance. Mian Nawaz Sharif, in an interview to an Indian correspondent; had expressed his desire to welcome Mr. Vajpayee on the inaugural ceremony of the bus service. To the surprise of Pakistani government, the Indian Prime Minister sending a positive response, announced to come to Lahore on February 20, 1999.¹⁹ The Chinese Defence Minister was also scheduled to visit Pakistan on February 20, 1999. There was a proposal to postpone Vajpayee's visit to one day but later on it was known that due to budget session of Indian parliament from February 22, the visit could not be rescheduled. The Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz was scheduled to receive Chinese minister along with three services chiefs at Islamabad airport on February 20. Later on, the services chiefs were scheduled to arrive at Lahore to join the formal reception line for Indian Prime Minister at the Governor House. They were to return to Islamabad in the evening to attend the banquet for Chinese Defence Minister hosted by foreign minister of Pakistan.²⁰ It had been decided in a meeting presided by Mian Nawaz Sharif that the foreign minister Sartaj Aziz and three services chiefs were to receive the Chinese guest at Islamabad while the Prime Minister was to receive Indian Prime Minister at Wahga at Lahore. That meeting was also attended by Gen. Pervez Musharraf. On the other hand, Qazi

Hussain Ahmad of Jamat-e-Islami had speculated in the media on February 21, that the services chiefs had refused to receive Indian Prime Minister.²¹ Jamat-e-Islami had declared February 20, 1999 as a 'Black Day' and took out large scale protest demonstration in Lahore. According to Sartaj Aziz, there were reports that certain 'agencies' which were against the peace process were sponsoring those agitations.

Lahore Summit

Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on 20th February, 1999, crossed the Punjab custom post in gold coloured bus. That bus journey formally launched a regular service between Lahore and Delhi. The Indian Premier was warmly welcomed by Pakistani Premier Nawaz Sharif. Pakistani and Indian as well as the international media declared it as "Historic" visit. He was the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Pakistan since Rajeev Gandhi's visit in 1989. While the first ever Prime Minister of India to visit Lahore since Nehru's visit in 1951, while expressing his feelings on the arrival at Lahore, the Indian Prime Minister said:

"I have brought the good will and hope of my fellow Indians who seek abiding peace and harmony with Pakistan. I am conscious this is abiding moments in South Asian history and I hope we will be able to rise to the challenges."²²

Vajpayee's announcement to visit was widely praised and was compared to Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1971 and Gorbachove visit of Berlin Wall in 1989. Mian Nawaz Sharif had discussed the move with President Clinton on the eve of the funeral of King Hussain of Jordan on February 8, 1999. The response of President Clinton was very positive and he urged Mian Nawaz Sharif to respond warmly to Vajpayee's gestures. Mian Nawaz Sharif was hinting some resistance from few politicians at home and "more likely military offices in Rawalpindi".²³

On February 21st, the Indian Prime Minister addressed a citizens' reception at the governor house Lahore. He said, "We have suffered enmity for so long now is the time for friendship. I know how to win this friendship; difficult decisions would have to be made, a solution of the Kashmir problem would have to be found, but we are ready."²⁴ The statement was a major shift in the traditional Indian stance on Kashmir. Mian Nawaz Sharif in his speech on the occasion also was of the opinion that both the countries would have to move beyond their traditional positions on Kashmir. The Lahore declaration signed by the two Prime Ministers on February 21 1999 shared, 'the vision of peace and stability' of the two Prime Ministers. They recorded their commitments to:

- identify their efforts to resolve all issues, including the issue of Jammu and Kashmir;
- follow their composite and integrated dialogue process for an early and positive outcome of the agreed bilateral agenda;
- take immediate steps for reducing the risk of accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons.

Along with Lahore declaration, the two foreign secretaries signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on nuclear and security issues.²⁵

Since the resumption of bilateral dialogue, that was the 7th meeting between the two Prime Ministers and the 3rd one between the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Vajpayee.²⁶ According to J. N. Dixit, a former foreign secretary of India, the origin of Vajpayee's visit went back to an interview by Nawaz Sharif, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, to Shekhar Gupta (editor in chief of Indian Express). In that interview, premier of Pakistan had expressed his willingness to meet Vajpayee at a time and place

of mutual convenience. His Indian counterpart came up with a prompt response. He made up his mind to use the inauguration of the bus service to respond to Nawaz Sharif's good will gesture.²⁷ Later on a formal invitation was also extended to the Indian Prime Minister and after that modalities were worked out. J. N. Dixit in his book also mentions main reasons for Vajpayee's historic journey to Lahore. First was about pledges and rhetorics made by Nawaz Sharif during his election campaign. He had promised to restore friendly relations with India. He had received an overwhelming popular support in those elections which was a clear testimony of popular backing for his initiatives on Pakistan India relations.

Secondly, to Vajpayee, Nawaz Sharif had given an impression of being constructive and rational. He had also dealt with Vajpayee's predecessors like Chandra Shekhar, Narsima Rao and I. K. Gujral. In his public rhetoric, Nawaz Sharif had remained positive about normalcy in relations with India. He was fully convinced that nuclearized South Asia would be more prone to lethal dangers. So Vajpayee had an understanding that his visit to Lahore would go a long way in making the peace process a success.²⁸

He also paid a visit to Minaar-i-Pakistan that was of a great standing and especially his statement issued on the occasion to accept Pakistan as a reality. The visit concluded with the issuance of "The Lahore Declaration" where both the countries pledged to "expedite the negotiating process in the spirit of the Simla Agreement and committed them to periodic meeting at the foreign minister level".²⁹

The Summit Meeting

The summit meeting of Lahore on February 21, 1999 was declared as genuine breakthrough in the bilateral relations of Pakistan and India. The declaration fully covered the spectrum of

their relations and issues. The Lahore Declaration was issued at a joint press conference which was addressed by both the Prime Ministers in Lahore. The Lahore Declaration embodied their shared vision of peace and stability between their states and prosperity for their people. While addressing a joint press conference, the two leaders expressed satisfaction on the commencement of bus service between Lahore and Delhi, the release of fishermen and civilian detainees. They also pledged to renew the contacts in sports. They reiterated that the dialogue on Kashmir would continue and the people should wait for the outcome which both Prime Ministers indicated to be hopefully positive. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif noted that they were able to move beyond the symbolism of inauguration of the bus service and the two sides held constructive and candid discussion.³⁰ It had been decided during Vajpayee's Lahore visit that both countries would facilitate and expedite back channel diplomacy on Kashmir. During Lahore peace process both the premiers had shown flexibility and did not stick to their traditional stance. Mr. Vajpayee did not declare Kashmir as an integral part of India while Mian Nawaz Sharif hinted to move beyond the stated position.³¹ It was also decided between the two premiers to slow down propaganda against each other through state controlled media. They pledged to 'refrain from intervention and interference' in each other's internal affairs and agreed to take 'immediate steps for reducing the risk of accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons. It was in March 1999 when the bus service started regularly between the two countries.

During their meetings, they built a consensus to narrow down the options regarding solution of Kashmir issue. They were going to devise a formula under which the eastern side of Chenab river, the Hindu majority areas, would go to India whereas the northern areas and Azad Kashmir would be the part of Pakistan and the issue regarding Kashmir valley would be dealt by the maximum autonomy formula presented by the Kashmir Study Group (KSG) and would be given priority. The meeting at Lahore could turn up

into a major breakthrough if it were implemented in true spirits. US also welcomed the resumption of Lahore Peace Process between the two countries. The Vajpayee's visit to Lahore had helped to raise high hopes for peace between the two nuclearized enemies.³²

The Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh had commented that very positive talks had been held between the two prime ministers. India had decided to support Pakistan in getting membership of Indian Ocean Rim Countries Organization (IORCO). Pakistan and India also decided to establish Indo-Pak Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In a banquet hosted by Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in his honour, Mr. Vajpayee said, "As we seek to realize issue, we have to be conscious that there is nothing which cannot be resolved through goodwill and dialogue. The solution of complex issue can only be sought in an atmosphere free from prejudice and by adopting the path of balance, moderation and realism." He also talked about possibility of no war pact and also about no first use of nuclear weapons accord. Addressing a joint news conference at the conclusion of Mr. Vajpayee's visit to Pakistan, the Prime Minister of India and Pakistan described their talks as substantive. In his statement, Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif noted that they were able to move beyond the symbolism of inauguration of the bus service and the two sides had held constructive and candid discussions.

During his historic journey to Lahore, Mr. Vajpayee visited Minar-i-Pakistan and tombs of Allama Iqbal and Ranjeet Singh. His visit especially to Minar-i-Pakistan was highly of symbolic nature. A message was disseminated to all Pakistanis that India has fully accepted Pakistan as a sovereign country. On this very significant occasion, he said:

"I have said it earlier and I say it again that I and Indian people have a deep desire for peace and friendliness for Pakistani people.

India and its people want to see prosperous and strong Pakistan and no one should have any doubt about this because only strong Pakistan is in the interest of India. The good beginning has been made and better results are forthcoming. We have to work together to usher in new era. A dangerous game of war and weaponry would no more be helpful in resolving the problem. A small spark can turn into a big fire destroying everything.”³³ “My friends advised me not to visit Minaar-e-Pakistan because that would put my approval seal on the creation of Pakistan but, a strong and prosperous Pakistan is in our own interest”.³⁴ The change in tone and overtures of Indian leaders were quite obvious. They seemed quite willing for having peaceful co-existence with Pakistan. Their statements clearly manifested a big shift in their positions. As a gesture of major departure from old policy, even before the start of the summit, the Indian Premier categorically stated that Kashmir issue would come under discussion. He said they would negotiate with sincerity on this and all other issues. That had happened for the first time since the Simla Agreement in 1972, that the Indian side has so clearly recognized the centrality of Kashmir on the agenda of talks.

The foreign ministers in mid-March chalked out “Road Map” for future course of relations. To expedite the normalization process, back channel diplomacy was also in practice. On Pakistani side Niaz A. Naik, the former foreign secretary and R. K. Mishra from Indian side started the second – track diplomacy. Both the special representatives had several meetings between October 1998 and May 1999. Track II continued to work to produce a conducive environment.

Both the Prime Ministers in their meeting in September, 1998 had come to the conclusion that civil servants would not be in a position to resolve the sensitive issues between both the countries. The political leaders would have to take the initiative. They also had a one on one meeting and agreed to set up a mechanism of back channel diplomacy to start a serious discussion on Kashmir.

Both the premiers agreed to nominate one representative to report directly to the Prime Minister. Mian Nawaz Sharif during his meeting with Vajpayee in September 1998 in New York said, "We have asked the two foreign secretaries to meet, but you know and I know that such sensitive and important issues cannot be resolved by civil servants. We as political leaders have to come to grips and take initiatives that will lead to solutions. You come up with any reasonable proposals on Kashmir and I promise to move forward responding to your proposals, are you ready?" Vajpayee with his typical cautions, looked right and left and said 'let us meet alone after lunch'.³⁵ USA and private institutions played a key role in encouraging the development of Confidence Building Measure (CBMS). This change in the bilateral relations occurred in the backdrop of mounting pressure of international community. With the nuclearization of South Asia, the world especially put an enormous pressure on India and Pakistan to normalize the strained bilateral relations. The bilateral talks had a great significance after the nuclear tests by both the countries. In the backdrop of composite dialogue or the Track I diplomacy, Track II also brought substantive outcomes. It played an important role in bringing both the countries closer to each other.

Indian foreign minister agreed to respond that within four to six weeks but before he could keep his promise Vajpayee government was toppled. The efforts had to face a severe blow when on April 17th, 1999, Vajpayee's government fell due to no-confidence. Similarly the test fires of Agni and response of Pakistan's Ghauri again escalated.³⁶ Then the first strain in the relations accrued in April 1999 with the launching of Agni II and Trishul Missile by India. Pakistan also responded by test firing Ghauri II and Shaheen Missile. The process of continued dialogue between the two countries was also hampered due to general elections in India in May 1999.³⁷

The severe blow to the process was the Kargil crisis between Pakistan and India in May-June, 1999 when a large number of

Mujahedeen had crossed the line of control and succeeded in capturing 15,000 ft. high peaks near the town of Kargil to monitor and maneuver the sole road link between valley and Ladakh. Pakistan had to face a lot of pressure. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif sent his Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz to India but his visit brought no results. During a visit of Pakistani foreign minister, Sartaj Aziz, to India Vajpayee had expressed his feelings full of emotions, "I had travelled to Pakistan with such sincerity and with high hope for durable peace between India and Pakistan. The real casualty of the Kargil crisis is the trust between the two countries."³⁸ Pakistan eventually had to accept the cease-fire to US interference on July 4 1999 but the price of Kargil episode was very heavy faced by even Mian Nawaz Sharif government.³⁹ They clearly exhibited that confidence building measures CBMs and diplomatic courtesies could not improve the bilateral relations and without solving the major problems they cannot work properly.⁴⁰

After Lahore Declaration, not only the public of Pakistan and India but international community was also hoping for a peaceful future for both countries who have a long record of enmity. The untimely dissolution of Lok Sabha (Indian Parliament) and announcement of early elections impeded the relationship process of dialogue. The rapid changes in Kashmir and the occupation of Kargil by the Mujahedeen really worried Indian government and both agreed to solve the situation but of no use. Mian Nawaz Sharif wanted to save both India and Pakistan from the apprehension of nuclear onslaught.⁴¹ He even invited Vajpayee to restart the Lahore peace process but by that time it was late. He had told Vajpayee that by waging wars between the two neighbours, nobody could achieve anything except destruction.⁴²

A lot of skepticism aroused on the real outcome of the parleys. Generally, it was preferred to "wait and see" whether Vajpayee's willingness to engage on Kashmir or as merely tactical move or signalled substantive shift in New Delhi's traditional position on Kashmir. Among the opposition parties in Pakistan, especially Jamat-i-Islami, accused government of a "secret deal" or

"sell out" on Kashmir. Having opposed any step towards normalization of Pak-India relations including the commencement of the Delhi-Lahore bus service, the Jamaat had unsuccessfully attempted to construct a 'human wall' to disrupt Vajpayee's Lahore visit. Unlike the Jamaat, the Kashmir-specific reaction of the political opposition had generally been positive. Parliamentary politicians were hoping that what appears to be a sincere summit-level, Nawaz-Vajpayee 'connect' may spell progress on the Kashmir front. On February 23, all parliamentary parties including the PPP during the Senate session unanimously welcomed the talks as a 'positive step'. However, a politicking Benazir Bhutto's position was contrary from her senators. In a Gujrat rally, she accused Nawaz Sharif of selling out the Kashmiri cause and for becoming the 'Yasser Arafat of South Asia.'⁴³

Conclusion

The Lahore Declaration of 1999 was a significant thaw in the bilateral relations of India and Pakistan. The leaders of both the countries realized the critical situations and ground realities and committed themselves to resolve all the outstanding issues. They expressed a conviction to take their countries on the path of prosperity and peace and to make South Asia a peaceful region. Lahore Declaration was a positive step towards a right direction. Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Sharif seemed to be saying not just "Let's be friends" but also "Let's be normal".⁴⁴The two Premiers had decided in their private discussions to solve the Kashmir issue by the end of that year. They had conviction that for the solution of Kashmir, only courage and commitment was required. To expedite the parleys, both appointed their special representatives. They were to discuss the fresh approaches to the Kashmir dispute.⁴⁵

It can be concluded that Lahore Declaration had bright prospects for the peace in the region and lasting solution of disputes. That was the exhibition of a political will by the political

leaders, for a peaceful relationship and it had melted the ice between the two countries. The Kargil crisis in May, 1999 and later on the military takeover in October, 1999 in Pakistan derailed the peace process with India. Pakistan lost a rare opportunity to solve the Kashmir problem.⁴⁶ It is a fact that normalization of relations is a common desire at the people's level.

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