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Zardari's Pilgrimage to Ajmer: Is Time for a Thaw in Relations Nigh?

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Introduction

The most strikingly remarkable feature of the visit of the Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari to India on 8 April 2012 is that it took place at all! Analysts generally would agree that the level of the current understanding (or the lack thereof) between the two countries would not extend to the felt need for warm hospitality to be accorded by one to the other. Yet this has happened. It does not necessarily signal a thaw in relations between the two often-implacable South Asian protagonists. But it certainly points to the palpable desire on both sides for such a phenomenon to begin. Rational acts in their bilateral relations seem to come in sudden flashes. This occasion was one such. It was billed 'private'. That was largely because to call it 'official' would have heightened expectations. Too often too many hopes have been raised in the past between the two. Those were only to be dashed to the ground almost immediately. Also, given their prevalent tensions, an official visit by one to the other would have brought grist to the mill of ardent detractors in both nations. They are, as the world knows, legion. The low-key nature of such a rare event is, therefore, quite understandable.

Also is the fact that it would be fraught with circumspection. Despite the stated 'spiritual' nature of the trip, for it involved a pilgrimage to the tomb of the holy Muslim Saint Khwaja Mainuddin Chishti in Ajmer, the generally perceived characteristics of the Pakistani leader are really too 'temporal' or 'earthly' for the religious factor to be preponderant. As such the

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purpose of the brief sojourn was undoubtedly 'political'. This, no matter how else it is described. The aim obviously was to shake the existing stasis in relations into a kinetic movement, however slow the motion.

Symbolisms

South Asians tend to be partial to symbolisms: also to historical parallels. Of these there were plenty. President Zardari brought along with him his son Bilawal. This was just like when his late father-in-law Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had his daughter (and Zardari's late wife) Benazir accompany him to the Shimla Conference in July 1972. At that time, one might recall, the ice between the two recently war-fighting nations had actually been broken for a while. Another symbolism was implied in the meetings between Bilawal, and Rahul, the scion of the Gandhi-Nehru family.

In reminiscence of the tradition of the mighty Mughals, a common historical legacy of both India and Pakistan, the potential leaders of the two countries – this 'pair of prince-lings' so to say – were corralled into a relationship of camaraderie. This set aside some clamour on both sides for more democratic optics! Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a strict vegetarian, made a tremendous gesture in laying on a luncheon table of Kashmiri Kebabs, demonstrating, on the one hand, Indian hospitality and at the same time, on the other, making the subtle symbolic point that the cuisine, and by implication Kashmir, was Indian!

The Visit

The 40-minute bilateral in New Delhi created positive atmospherics. Just the previous day an avalanche had engulfed nearly 150 Pakistani soldiers on the Siachen glacier in the Himalayas. For years on this sheet of ice where nothing grows, troops of both countries have been positioned eyeball to eyeball. Singh offered Zardari solace and comfort and even humanitarian support. The first was well-received, and the second not yet, which was not surprising. In the South there is also a dispute over a more economically worthwhile patch of water called the Sir Creek. Kashmir and water issues remain unresolved. Also to be noted is the case of Hafeez Saeed, the founder of Lashkar-e-Taiba, wanted by both India and the United States. Recently Washington has announced a bounty of US\$ 10 million for information as to his whereabouts. The Pakistani authorities are unlikely to want to collect this amount, though Hafiz Saeed, in a public appearance, has tauntingly claimed it for himself since he would be happy, as he said, to declare his location. India has acted with restraint by making no such monetary commitments, taking the realistic situation into cognisance. But New Delhi has urged punitive action for Saeed's alleged involvement in the massacre in Mumbai in 2008.

It was obviously not possible for the two heads of government to resolve the issues. But they at least agreed to address them. The methodology would be a series of meetings between the relevant Permanent Secretaries of both countries. This will commence with the Home Secretaries. Pakistan, perhaps with a modicum of excessive enthusiasm, suggested an early date, 16 April 2012. Sensing that haste might make waste, India suggested a later schedule. No matter. Talks have produced progress in the past. Take Pakistan's offer of Most Favoured Nation treatment to Indian manufactures. Such actions create constituencies at home, and the beneficiaries eventually push their governments. The same may happen in the security area. Some Pakistanis have indeed grown tired of terrorism and are beginning to yearn for peace. Ironically most in Pakistan now see the West as a greater enemy than India, and the deterioration of the relations with Islamabad's erstwhile friends appears to have become conversely related to the improvement of sentiments towards New Delhi. The South Asian diaspora, whose global influence is burgeoning, is also increasingly becoming the glue pulling the 'desi' communities together culturally. South Asian soldiers, peace-keeping for the United Nations in far-flung places, are coming to each other's aid. Their diplomats are cooperating in the Security Council. All this is good news.

Conclusion

But perhaps, not good enough! When analysts weigh the results of the visit to India, the scale of failures is likely to hang heavier than the one for success. But it would be wrong to ignore it. Both Zardari and Singh have shown courage in meeting. Both are facing uneasy times at home. Ironically, the relations of both vis-à-vis their military currently is stressful. Perhaps now is the time for some bonding of the civilian political masters. Elections are round the corner, in less than two years in both countries. Unfortunately, given current mindsets, such meetings still cost rather than gain votes for both sides. Hopefully someday this will change as the people begin to genuinely prefer peace to war. The leaders must lead, and it is to their credit that they appear to be doing so.

While Indian and Pakistani heads of government tend to meet as their term ends, it is hoped some day they will meet as it begins. The Chinese have helpfully encouraged the current process. The complexities of South Asian politics sometimes prove too baffling for the Americans, but they too are making positive noises. A sad combination of hubris and hauteur may have led them to bleed too long for too little. They are exhausted and they want out. Over 60 years of sovereign independence should be sufficient for India and Pakistan to be able to manage their own backyards, Afghanistan for instance, without interference from faraway nations. The players of the 'great Game' should henceforth be indigenous, rather than alien hands from distant parts. At least this is what the regional actors are beginning to feel. It may be long, but let the process be an inexorable one. To the Pakistanis and Indians

respectively, Delhi and Islamabad should not, in the words of another past South Asian saint, Nizamuddin Auliya, be ‘hanooz door ast’— ‘yet too far!’

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