

What prevents Pakistan and India from starting an uninterrupted dialogue ?

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THE disputes between India and Pakistan have cast a long and dark shadow over their relationship since the two countries stepped out of colonial bondage in 1947. The circumstances surrounding their birth made it inevitable that ill feelings would mar ties and make coexistence difficult.

But did it have to be so forever? This question is now being asked by sane and rational people on both sides of the border. Even after seven decades that saw a major reconfiguration of the map of South Asia through three wars and the breakup of Pakistan, this question has a strange urgency to it.

It was asked yet once again at a Karachi Literature Festival (KLF) session on Sunday if India and Pakistan could not be friends. And how? The most obvious approach that is widely accepted is the one advocated by Mani Shankar Aiyar, an Indian diplomat-politician-activist, whose persistence and courage in promoting peace in South Asia is inspiring. He fearlessly says what many in his country would fear to say. He believes what we need is “uninterrupted and unintermittable dialogue”.

There is no disputing the need for such a dialogue. Two other panellists in the KLF session, Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, a retired diplomat, and Asad Sayeed, an economist, were equally vocal in stressing the need for peace.

The time has come to decide our priorities.

Given this consensus on the stage at the KLF and the applause it received, one would be right in asking, then, what prevents the two countries from starting a dialogue and reaching some kind of agreement to live and let live? The answer was provided by no one but our inimitable Javed Jabbar, media man, politician, social worker etc. He protested that the panellists were “demonising the Pakistani state” which incidentally none of them did.

However, there is a tendency in Pakistan, mainly among those who wield powerful influence on policymaking, to equate the defence establishment and the government in power with the Pakistani state. This is where the problem lies. It means that Pakistan’s posture is frozen until strategic and military factors come into play to lead to a change.

On the other hand, India’s position on various issues depends on political forces — the policy of the political party in office and the opposition if it is strong enough. That is how the Modi government’s stance is more rigid and anti-Muslim than that of many of its predecessors. It may soften if the Modi-led government changes.

The problem with us is that the controlling voice on our side is that of the security establishment, even when we have a seemingly democratic structure to govern the country. This has been the case since the 1950s when Ayub Khan, a general in uniform, became the defence minister and sat in the

cabinet. Throughout our history, the men in khaki have either been openly at the helm or have pulled the strings from behind by co-opting politicians as their allies.

Mr Aiyar's suggestion makes sense that the dialogue between the two countries should continue and tricky issues such as Kashmir and terrorism directed against India should also be on the agenda. If need be, the dialogue could be at the people-to-people level.

The positive gains that will accrue from a friendly and cooperative relationship between India and Pakistan have been discussed and debated for decades at all kinds of fora. I have yet to see a sincere plea for India-Pakistan friendship from the security establishment which is seen as the beneficiary of antagonistic ties between the two countries.

The stereotype argument is that we need security for our survival. True. But if the security is to cost us heavily and in the process destroy our human resources, there will be no survivors left needing protection. A land without people is hardly a country. It is just a territory without any human ownership.

It is time we recognised this before we enter into a confrontation with India. Ashraf Jehangir's implicit suggestion is eminently wise that we prioritise the issues that divide India and Pakistan and address the urgent ones immediately. The time has come to decide our priorities in our relations with India.

Similarly, Asad Sayeed had a valid and pragmatic point when he strongly pleaded for "bilateral trade with India just for the sake of trade" and with no other motive — I may add political motive — in view. Trade is very important to inject some rationality and pragmatism in the relationship of two states. Sayeed tells me that China is trading with Taiwan although the alienation between the two is much greater than that between India and Pakistan.

It is time to start a dialogue with India. At one time it was essential for our prosperity and our development. Today, it can be said that our very survival depends on it.

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