

Impression of my visit to Pakistan

Commodore R P Khanna, AVSM (Retd)

Are India Pakistan relations on the mend? Do recurring terrorist actions in India, including the 30 October 2005 serial blasts in Delhi prior to Diwali and Id send wrong messages? Are the terrorist outfits determined to wreck the peace processes? Are they continuing to brainwash young men, including sophisticated, western educated with the promise of *jannat* or heaven and *hoors* or angelic faces if they engage in jihad, militancy in the month of *Ramzan* and convert themselves as human bombs around the world in important cities, trains and buses? Is the *mullah's* influence increasing or diminishing? Is Pakistan genuinely curbing terrorists or engaged in deluding the world by a few captures and some military and police actions to show that they are serious about the war on terrorism and they are a frontline State in this war? Is Pakistan's move for opening the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir just a face saving signal or is it a genuine effort, alongside more trade routes with India as well as people to people contacts through exchange of cultural and intellectuals' visits to each other's country? Will the *jihadi* outfits, whose political outfits, rule the North West Frontier Province and have a strong presence in Pakistan's Parliament be able to undo whatever the Pakistan Government is trying to achieve by opening up to India? Have Pakistani terrorist leaders shifted their base to Bangladesh, which is now the world's terrorist hub and with the government there turning a blind eye to the presence of terrorist leaders from Pakistan, India's North Eastern States and even South East Asia there? Is it Pakistan's secret agenda to work for the Islamisation of the world, while using the present time as a breathing space for the ultimate objectives?

These are several questions that come to my mind and after a visit to Pakistan I have tried to discuss some of these issues. Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) by India and Pakistan have had a positive impact on the South Asian scenario. From despair to hope - these are the new signals in 58 years after the two countries became free and fought three wars. The mullahs, militants

Commodore R P Khanna, AVSM (Retd) is the former Defence Advisor to the Indian High Commissioner in Nigeria. He had a number of appointments both ashore and afloat including Command of Ships and ashore establishment.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVI, No. 563, January-March 2006.

and the terrorists may be breathing fire, but most Pakistanis prefer to ignore them. They may hold peace in South Asia to some kind of ransom, they may threaten the rulers of Pakistan, and they may be running the madrassas and churning out campaigners of hate. Yet there is optimism. The Pakistani rulers may not be writing them off, but they might be trying hard to contain them in spite of the many odds they face and India may be at the receiving end of their activities.

The veneer of courtesy Pakistanis show towards Indians impresses visiting individuals and groups, as this writer would like to acknowledge after a recent visit to Pakistan. Their hospitality and warmth touched our hearts. This is also the Pakistani experience of Indian warmth and hospitality. They are greatly impressed by the openness of Indian society; market places, approaching world class now, and freedom of expression. In this respect, the Pakistanis envy us. They also envy the great diversity and ethnic variations, which are full of colour. Not that the Pakistanis do not have regional diversities of their own, but India to them is kaleidoscopic and unique.

My brother Colonel R N Khanna, who graduated from the Government College, Lahore, in 1941, received an invitation from the college to attend its 140th Anniversary. He asked me, my wife, and our sister to join him so that after the college celebrations, we could visit our native place, *Pind Dadan Khan* as well as Bhakwal, Sharakpur, Mardi Baha-ud-din and Rawalpindi where my father served as a government doctor prior to the Independence in 1947.

We left Delhi on 20 March 2005, by *Shatabadi Express* and travelled comfortably. We arrived in Amritsar in the afternoon and stayed in a suite at the Golden Temple Complex. The visit to *Harmandar Sahib* was a memorable experience. The *Darbar Sahib* atmosphere was peaceful, sombre and relaxing amid bright lights reflecting from the Sarovar from which the city of Amritsar takes its name. The *kirtan* or devotional music was indeed soothing.

We left for the Wagah border the next day. This was an experience of a lifetime. We completed Indian Immigration formalities at the border on the Amritsar side and walked across to enter Pakistan. The Indian porters, who took our bags, were relieved by Pakistanis with smiles, an indication that we were welcome to

their country. There was no bargaining by the Pakistani porters and they accepted whatever we gave them with grace. The immigration officer at the Pakistan border was courteous and offered us a cup of tea. The immigration formalities were completed while we sat in his office. We took a taxi to the Gymkhana Club in Lahore where we were informed that there was no accommodation available. However, the manager telephoned what is called "The Seven Star Guest House" opposite the Gymkhana Club where accommodation was provided.

At Lahore, my wife, myself and my sister were invited to dinner hosted by the Government College Celebration Committee to join my brother. We met the elite of the city and cordiality was abundant. We went sightseeing and tasted exotic ethnic food in the well lit *Anarkali* Food Bazaar and visited the *Gurdwara* in the Lahore Fort. We joined the *Langar* and requested *Gurdwara* Bhajji to do "Ardas" for the welfare of our family. At the *Gurdwara* most of the *Sewadars* were Muslims. They were courteous. They said they were volunteers in an organization, which believes that there is only one God.

On the last night of our stay in Lahore, my brother asked the taxi driver, who was to take us to Islamabad the next day, to show his driving licence. It came as a shock to us that the driver did not have a valid licence. He told us that this should cause us no worry because he will be able to bribe the policeman and take us safely to Islamabad. This was not acceptable to us, especially in a foreign land. If at some point there was verification or a road accident, we could have been detained by the police for questioning for utilizing the service of an unauthorized driver or cab. I am narrating this incident to show the attitude of a common man in Pakistan which is no different than in India about bribing a policeman and getting away from crime. The owner of the guest house came to our rescue and advised us to go by a luxury coach to Islamabad and take a taxi in Islamabad to visit different places.

We left Lahore by coach the next morning. The journey was comfortable and the roadways well maintained. The attractive hostess kept a steady flow of refreshments. I had the opportunity to interact with some of the passengers, including a journalist, who was the daughter of a retired Rear Admiral in the Pakistan Navy. Her father had attended a course at the Royal College of Defence

Studies in Britain along with Vice Admiral S K Chand of the Indian Navy, a family friend of ours. This established a sort of rapport. Incidentally her father had done a specialist course in Navigation and Aircraft Direction at *H M S Dryad* in the UK.

We arrived in Islamabad at 2.30 p.m. on 24 March 2005 and drove straight to the Royal International Guest House, where the Indian Naval Adviser to the Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, (Captain Ravi Pandit), had arranged accommodation for us. The owner of the guesthouse, Mr Karim made us feel at home.

Apart from sightseeing and shopping, I went to visit the Islamabad Golf Club and bought some souvenirs, including a golf cap.

We visited Punja Sahib, the famous *Gurdwara* where Guru Nanak had left an impression of his palm (Punja) to start a free flow of water for his devotees. The *Sewadars* were helpful. They did not let us go to collect food, but brought it as they said we were elderly people and their guests and it was their moral duty to serve us. *Punja Sahib* was truly serene.

As planned, we hired a taxi to visit Pind Dadan Khan, Mandi Bhau Din and Bhakwal, (having visited Sharakpur earlier when we were in Lahore). We had been to school in those places. Most of the places where we had stayed and the hospitals where my father worked as a doctor had been modernized, but in the school in Bhakwal, there appeared to be little change in the classrooms, the Head Master's office and the playground, except mats which have been replaced by chairs and tables. Seeing the seventh, eighth and ninth classrooms brought back memories of praises and punishment by the teachers in my days as a schoolboy.

We talked to some people in towns and villages where we had grown up. We were welcomed warmly by the residents staying close to our original homes. Their hospitality was typical of villagers in India. They spread "charpais" for us to sit and offered us "lassi", *nimboo pani* and food. At Pind Dadan Khan, my brother met a classfellow of about 70 years ago. Old memories and affection was relived. The same warmth was showered on us in Rawalpindi, where my parents had spent two years before migrating to India and this was an interesting experience. Although there were many changes in the residential areas, the Rose Cinema complex in Rawalpindi next to the hospital looked the same as before and was still screening *Hunterwali*, a popular film of those days.

On the last day of our visit, 29 March 2005, I called on Captain Ravi Pandit who invited the Air Force Adviser to his room in the High Commission. The Army Adviser, who was a Brigadier, offered to come over (typical of a Defence Officer), but I felt it was my duty to call on him in his office.

I had myself been Defence Adviser to the High Commissioner in Nigeria 30 years ago and we had an opportunity to exchange our experiences.

The High Commission's car with an Indian driver came to fetch me from the guesthouse. On the way he remarked that Pakistani security or intelligence was following us, but this appears to be a common practice. The Naval Adviser told me that there has been a welcome change and Indian diplomats are breathing somewhat easy.

The same evening we went to a restaurant, but the waiter there refused to present a bill, saying that we were their guests and it was their moral duty to do their bit for us. We politely refused the offer and paid the bill with a generous tip.

The next day, we went to Karachi to meet our friends, Sartaj and Rizwana, whom we had met in Lagos, Nigeria, where I was posted from 1973 to 1976 as Defence Adviser. They drove us to their large and luxurious house. I had a desire to visit a museum in Karachi, but we had little time. Our host's house was a museum of sorts.

They had collected rare pieces from all over the world, particularly India (Jodhpur and Jaipur) which they visit frequently and also curios from China, Bali in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Our Karachi visit was an eye-opener as it has been modernised and roads are good, shopping centers and malls are quite plush. Prosperity is evident in Karachi and every second car is a Toyota Corolla.

On 2 April 2005, my wife's birthday, our hosts lined up a celebration and they invited their brothers, sisters and cousins to dinner and laid on a cake cutting ceremony. This was most touching. We left Karachi on 4 April 2005 by Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flight. It was comfortable and the crew took special care of Indian passengers. My general impressions are summarized below.

Like Hindi there is politeness in Urdu language. For greetings only *Salam Walekum* to be replied by *Walekum Salam* is used, instead of Good Morning, Good Evening, etc. The word *Khuda Hafiaz* is used instead of "God Bless You".

The Pakistani people have not forgotten their culture and by and large not taken to the Western way of life. Man in the street wears salwar and kameez. Very few literate middle aged women use Burka. Young girls and middle aged women wear elegant salwar and kameez and we did not see a single girl during the fortnight's stay in Pakistan, who did not have a *Duppatta*.

No student in school or college is allowed to wear jeans and trousers. However, we were informed that in private parties young girls do use jeans but do not wear the same in public.

From the elite of Pakistan, I got the impression that Mullahs try to whip up frenzy and hate campaign in the name of Islam. Their power has to some extent been curbed by General Musharraf.

The man in the street is not interested in Jammu and Kashmir. People we met said to us that this is not their problem. It should be left to the politicians to settle it once for all. However, this should not come in the way of people to people dealings. Their general remark in Punjabi was *Sanu Ki, Kashmir Kinnuu Jaave? Sadi lor hai Roti Kapra aur Makan* (We are not concerned as to whom Kashmir goes we need bread, clothing and shelter).

General Musharraf evokes a mixed feeling. Some people (mostly upper middle class) feel that he is the right man for Pakistan and democracy is hardly suitable for their country. On the other hand, man in the street remarks that rich are becoming richer and poor the poorer under Musharraf.

Most Pakistani show their warmth by saying *Aap hamare mehman ho, aur hamara farz hai hum aap ki khatir karen* (You are our guests and it is our duty to look after you).

In conclusion I feel that the Pakistani in general is friendly and is all for good neighbourly relations, freer travel and easier visits by their divided families in the two countries. They appreciate that the two countries have many people speaking the same language, and similar life style. They also appreciate that the trade between the two countries would help both countries in particular

Pakistan, as India manufactures most of the items and could supply at very reasonable prices. At present most of their trade is with China, Korea and Japan. Lastly, the Mullahs and hot heads try to spoil the atmosphere and are not for peace between the two countries or around the world.

I also made it a point to gather opinions about terrorism in general and particularly their attitude towards Jehadi activities in Jammu and Kashmir through discreet interaction with the people in streets, taxi drivers, shopkeepers and so on. They feel that the *Quran* does not permit terrorism and they are deadly against it. But when it came to Jammu and Kashmir, almost every one felt that whatever was happening in there, was a local uprising where freedom fighters were fighting against the Indian Armed Forces. This is a result of propaganda by the Pakistan authorities during the last five decades. However, the intelligentsia felt that terrorism is a worldwide phenomenon and is prevalent in India, Pakistan, Jammu and Kashmir, the US, the UK, Indonesia, Malaysia, Israel, Iraq and so on.

About Musharraf, my hosts felt that there is a welcome change in his attitude after the 11 September 2001 incident in the US and train and bus incidents in London. They felt that Pakistan is dependent for its economic development on the US and he has no choice but to at least outwardly show that he is taking strict action against the terrorist organisations.