



# THE HINDU CENTRE

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## The Advantages of Bottom-up Diplomacy

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The Chief Minister of Punjab, Parkash Singh Badal, and Deputy Chief Minister, Sukhbir Singh Badal, handing over the keys of Maize Dehusker-cum-Sheller to Pakistan Punjab Chief Minister Mohammad Shahbaz Sharif as a token of love and affection from Punjab Agricultural University, in Ludhiana, to the people of Western Punjab. File: PTI

*The tale of the two Punjabs - in India and Pakistan - is one that evokes strong emotions on both sides of the border. Yet, a fresh ground initiative, like the recent visit of Shahbaz Sharif, the Chief Minister of Pakistan's Punjab, to India is a pointer to the constructive role that States can play to improve international relations.*

The recent four-day visit of Shahbaz Sharif to India has once again brought to light the constructive role that sub-regional /State governments can play in diplomacy with the outside world, including neighbours like Pakistan. His visit has come at a time when national governments may be finding it difficult to carry on substantive engagement with neighbouring countries due to political compulsions.

Mr. Sharif, who is the Chief Minister of Pakistan Punjab and also the brother of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, was invited by the Indian Punjab government for the final of the Kabaddi World Championship held in Ludhiana on December 14. During his time in India, he also visited New Delhi and met with the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh. Apart from discussing critical issues, including recent tensions across the Line of

Control (LoC) and the need for giving a further fillip to bilateral commerce and trade, Mr. Shahbaz Sharif also extended to Dr. Singh an invitation to visit Pakistan on behalf of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. A formal invitation was handed over to the Indian PM by Nawaz Sharif's special assistant Tariq Fatemi, who was also present during the course of the meeting.

Dr. Singh's visit to Pakistan has been put on the backburner due to skirmishes across the LoC and a terrorist attack in September on the eve of his meeting with Mr. Nawaz Sharif in New York. It would also be pertinent to point out that the two PMs – known to be committed to peace – made some strong statements. Mr. Sharif, while speaking in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, stated that the Kashmir dispute could trigger a war. Dr Singh responded by stating that Pakistan could not win a war during the latter's life time.

The recent drubbing that the Congress Party had to face in four of the five States where Assembly elections were held has laid to rest whatever chances there are of any grand gestures from the Indian side – including a Prime Ministerial visit to Pakistan.

However, it is to be noted that the compulsions of national politics in both countries did not prevent Chief Ministers of the two Punjabs from pushing the envelope for greater linkages between these states on both sides of the border in a number of spheres.

Mr. Shahbaz Sharif, who was the Chief Guest for the World Kabaddi Cup final, made an emotional speech in chaste Punjabi before the commencement of the event, speaking about the necessity of people-to-people exchanges apart from offering to host next year's edition of the championship. Mr. Sharif also stated that India and Pakistan should compete in science and education and not view each other as adversaries. In addition to this, Mr. Sharif also visited his native village Jatti Umra, which laid out a red carpet for him. Mr. Sharif's family left the village in 1932, but they have retained their links with certain families from the village. In order to learn more about agricultural practices and research in East Punjab, he also visited the Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), Ludhiana.

The Chief Ministers of the two Punjabs also issued a joint statement in Amritsar, before Mr. Sharif's departure for Pakistan. In the statement, "it was mutually agreed to promote cooperation for the common interest of peace, harmony, economic growth and leveraging each other's potential.

Apart from trade and commerce, the thrust is on greater cooperation in agriculture and veterinary sciences. For this purpose, a committee consisting of the Vice Chancellors of Punjab Agricultural University (Ludhiana), Agricultural University (Faisalabad, Pakistan) and Guru Angad Dev Veterinary Sciences University (Ludhiana) was constituted during this visit.

While the dividends of the Punjab-Punjab engagement will not show up instantly, it is significant for a number of reasons. First, the initiative taken by the Indian Punjab is encouraging. The Indian Punjab is currently ruled by the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), an ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Even though the BJP has been upping the ante against Pakistan, the government in the Indian Punjab has not followed suit. Instead, it has taken an independent stand and pushed for greater engagement with its neighbour. It would also be pertinent to mention here that the initial exchanges between the two Punjabs were started exactly a decade ago by the Congress government headed by Captain Amarinder Singh. The former Congress Chief Minister went to Lahore in 2004 to attend a seminar organised by the World Punjabi Conference. The fact that there is a consensus within Punjab on better ties with Pakistan, and also between New Delhi and Chandigarh in spite of different political dispensations, is encouraging.

Second, Kabaddi tournaments and other such exchanges are a refreshing change, since it is ordinary citizens from both sides who get a chance to interact and not just a select band of people. While cultural exchanges and cricket matches have played their role in linking both countries, it is imperative to have exchanges where individuals from smaller towns and varied social and economic backgrounds are involved.

Third, it is quite ironic that nearly 15 years ago, the current Chief Minister of Punjab was one amongst many members of former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's entourage to Lahore. While Parkash Singh Badal did meet Mr. Shabaz Sharif, the agenda for discussion was limited. Today, both Punjabs have reached a point where at least in certain areas engagement is reasonably free, in spite of relations between the national capitals being tense. Only last year, the Indian Punjab's Deputy Chief Minister, Mr. Sukhbir Singh Badal, visited Pakistani Punjab and a whole gamut of issues was discussed, with trade and people-to-people contact being given greater precedence.

Fourth, the fact that both sides are keen to move beyond emotional rhetoric also makes this significant since some specific areas have been pinpointed and there is a clear appetite on both sides for economic exchanges, with the benefits arising out of cooperation in the realm of economics and agriculture. The setting up of committees and outlining of at least some aims and objectives is encouraging and sends an unequivocal message that both provinces are keen to move beyond just emotional speeches and pappis-jhappis (kisses and hugs in Punjabi).

Finally, it also brings to the fore the point that regional influence on foreign policy is not always obstructionist and myopic. While the instances of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu may strengthen such an argument, the Indian Punjab's engagement with the Pakistani Punjab has shown that state governments have the potential of being strong bridge-builders between countries within the neighbourhood.