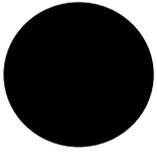


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The Two Punjabs: A Cultural Path to Peace in South Asia?

Alyssa Ayres

Last year, the Pakistani cricket team spent a month and a half in India on tour, its first such visit in more than six years. Its first match was in Mohali, a small city in the Indian state of Punjab. As expected, hoards of fans converged to watch, but it wasn't the usual Indian cricket audience. India allowed Pakistanis to cross the border to watch the match, and nearly 3,000 showed up. In two days, 38 busloads of Pakistani fans, for the most part Punjabis, crossed the border. Hotel accommodations became so tight that Indian Punjabis opened up their homes to the visitors, prompting sentimental newspaper reports of a Punjabi brotherhood spanning the border. A young Pakistani woman who was staying with an Indian family told a reporter, "The people here are so warm and friendly. I wish I could stay here forever." Indian Punjabi shopkeepers offered their wares to their Pakistani cousins at huge discounts, at times even for free. This eruption of bonhomie inspired some fans to declare allegiance—perhaps for the first time ever—to both national cricket teams. Images broadcast from the five-day match showed young men with their faces painted with the saffron, white, and green of the Indian flag on one side, and the green and white of Pakistan's flag on the other.

Only three years ago, India and Pakistan stood toe-to-toe on the brink of war. Now, however, a new impetus for peace, with a specific cultural flavor, is growing. "It's a reflection of the spirit of Punjabinat [Punjabiness] that binds the two Punjabs," said the chief minister of Pakistani Punjab when asked about the emotional outpouring seen

in cross-border Punjabi gatherings. "The ripples from these meetings will reach the powers-that-be in both countries, because it shows the direction the people want to take."

The "two Punjabs" to which the chief minister referred are the successor states of the unified Punjab of British India. At the partition of India in 1947, Punjab, a sprawling province of 30 million people, was split along religious lines by the departing British, who awarded the predominantly Muslim western half to Pakistan and the predominantly Hindu and Sikh eastern half to India. For nearly 60 years—save for wars between India and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, and a Sikh insurgency in Indian Punjab abetted by Pakistan in the 1980s—the two halves have been frozen apart by the international border that runs between them.

Lately, the ice has begun to thaw, however, with consequences that may well reverberate beyond the two provinces. Since 2004, India and Pakistan have been engaged in intergovernmental talks on a host of complex issues, including the status of disputed Kashmir and nuclear weapons, and international attention has been focused on these official efforts. But developments taking place outside the international spotlight—not in Delhi and Islamabad, but in Amritsar and Faisalabad, Lahore and Ludhiana—could potentially transform the nature of India-Pakistan relations. In such places, exchanges between ordinary Punjabis could snowball into a movement that could overcome the longstanding enmity of these two nuclear-armed neighbors. This effort even

has an official slogan: “Reviving the Spirit of Punjab, Punjabi, and Punjabiya.”

This Punjabi bonhomie is dismissed by some as little more than sentimentality. And in truth, the problems that have undermined previous India-Pakistan peace initiatives—terrorist attacks, for one—could undermine this budding effort. The powerful Pakistani military views India as its arch-enemy. Within India, where memories of the Sikh insurgency are still fresh, the movement is bound to inspire ambivalence.

But such skepticism ought not to blind us to the untapped potential of cultural diplomacy. The two Punjabs wield disproportionate influence in their respective countries, and they can call upon a prosperous and culturally active diaspora in the West, which, through the growing popularity of Punjabi musical and cultural events, has begun to carve out a distinct Punjabi sensibility that transcends the national divides back “home.” Most importantly, the incipient people-to-people contacts between the two Punjabs directly address the core of the India-Pakistan conflict: the problem of incompatible national identities.

The Great Divide

Talk of Punjabi brotherhood might seem strange to those whose knowledge of the history of the subcontinent derives from Richard Attenborough’s film *Gandhi*. In its moving final scenes, two seemingly endless streams of refugees trudge in opposite directions, illustrating the scale of human displacement that occurred with partition. Punjab was disproportionately affected by this great upheaval because, like Bengal, it was a religiously plural province with a slim Muslim majority. In the Punjab of 1947, 54 percent of the population was Muslim, the rest Hindu and Sikh.

As the British quit India, they carved up the provinces of Punjab and Bengal and gave half of each to India and to newly created Pakistan. This division was an attempt to reconcile the incompatible demands of

two nationalist struggles: the Indian freedom movement and the Pakistan movement. Mahatma Gandhi’s Indian National Congress fought for independence from British colonial rule, as did Mohammad Ali Jinnah’s Muslim League. But where the Congress sought to preserve India as a multireligious, secular nation, the League demanded the creation of a separate nation-state, which, it argued, was the only way to preserve the political interests of India’s Muslims. The Muslim League equated Islam with nationality, and its leadership believed that this nationality would be imperiled in an India in which Muslims formed a minority and could always be outvoted. Partition thus had the effect of privileging one type of community affiliation (religion) over others (ethnolinguistic, territorial).

The departing British partitioned Punjab down to the district level, conducting a sort of religious gerrymander. As Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs were forced from their homes, partition’s bloody excesses tore Punjab apart, and neighbor turned on neighbor. Although exact figures for Punjab alone are not known, more than a million people altogether perished during partition, and between 12 and 18 million people were displaced. Many were raped, maimed, tortured, or killed. These traumas were seared into the region’s collective memory. As the late poet Amrita Pritam would write during that terrible year, in one of the most revered verses of modern Punjabi literature: “Today I say to Waris Shah / Speak from your grave.... Arise, O friend of the afflicted; arise and see the state of Punjab / Corpses strewn on fields, and the Chenaab flowing with much blood.”

From “Ancient” Hatreds to Ancient Ties

In the intervening decades, the fact that partition ruptured the ethnoreligious fabric of the Punjab was lost in what came to be understood as the “natural” national existence of the two Punjabs, that is, as a Pakistani Muslim Punjab and an Indian Hindu

and Sikh Punjab. Viewed from the perspective of Punjabi cultural and political history, however, partition was anomalous. Partition's toll of religious violence was so heavy in the Punjab precisely because of its earlier history of religious coexistence. Because the three communities—Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh—were so closely intertwined, partition could only be accomplished by the knife.

While undivided Punjab, particularly from the 1920s up to 1947, had its share of religious conflict, the region's history can be viewed through the prism of cultural connections rather than religious divisions. In the decades leading up to partition, Punjabi elites had in fact rejected the premise of religious partition. Up until 1946, they maintained an allegiance to the cross-community Unionist Party. The Unionists had little interest in the proposed establishment of Pakistan, as it would have meant the division of Punjab. Nor did they wish to be entirely subsumed within an India dominated by the Congress Party. Punjab's Unionists argued instead for an autonomous state—with its own prime minister—in a broader Indian federation. This chapter in Punjab's history has been downplayed in the later political narratives and official histories of India and Pakistan.

Earlier periods in Punjab history, moreover, appear to have offered more fluid definitions of religious identity than that which came to preoccupy people in the mid-twentieth century. The region's strong tradition of Sufism is a good example. Sufi Islamic practice emphasizes a spirituality of direct, often mystical, connection with God. Its meditative practices draw upon local idioms and imagery, permitting great cultural inclusiveness. The Sikh religion, native to Punjab, incorporated the Islamic idea of one God with Hindu philosophies of reincarnation and the illusory nature of life's experiences. Perhaps most importantly, Sikhism's founder emphasized the essential unity of Islam and Hinduism, and presented his new faith as a syncretic path. The Punjabiyyat

movement emphasizes this historical legacy in which individuals were not tied to a single, immobile identity. The movement's invocation of Punjabi literature that emphasizes unity, harmony, and the possibilities of coexistence thus allows people to transcend the division of partition and reclaim a culture they share.

Punjabis take their literature very seriously, seeing it as nearly sacred, and its appeal—particularly that of some older canonical texts—cuts across religious differences. One often cited example of this allegiance to Punjabi-ness lies in the story of Udham Singh. Now revered in India as a freedom fighter in the struggle against the British Raj, Singh stood trial for the assassination of the British lieutenant governor of Punjab, Michael O'Dwyer. O'Dwyer had overseen the infamous Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919—in which British troops in Amritsar opened fire on a crowd of unarmed protestors, killing at least 400 men, women, and children. On the witness stand, Udham Singh refused to give his real name. Instead, he insisted on calling himself “Ram Mohammad Singh,” by this means summoning the three religions of undivided Punjab. Moreover, Singh refused to swear on the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, or the Sikh scriptures, maintaining that his allegiance was to an eighteenth-century Punjabi love story, *Heer-Ranjha*, by the poet and writer Waris Shah. *Heer-Ranjha* tells the story of a tragic romance between a boy and girl of different tribes. Ranjha, the hero, follows religious practices that could be viewed as either Hindu or Muslim. Most importantly, the tale is popular across religious communities as a story perceived to be quintessentially Punjabi. When Punjabis refer to this tale, they see it not as a justification for ancient hatreds but as a demonstration of ancient ties.

The New Spirit of Punjabiyyat

Drawing upon this older history of affinity, the new spirit of Punjabiyyat has been nur-

tured by activists and intellectuals on both sides of the border as well as by the Punjabi diaspora. Their efforts range from musical, literary, and dramatic exchanges to sporting matches and cooperative policy studies examining trade potential. Some of these efforts have recently received governmental support at the provincial level on both sides of the border. Taken together, they point to a slowly increasing space in which the power of culture has begun to bridge the divide of religion, so long perceived as a permanent chasm. Like the international ping-pong games of the early 1970s, which preceded the opening to China, the seemingly innocuous interactions in the name of the spirit of Punjabin hold the promise of a more peaceful future.

A significant area of common interest is the region's agricultural economy and development needs. The Punjab, a fertile plain naturally endowed by five rivers, has long been known as the breadbasket of the subcontinent, and after partition the two Punjabs continued to be agricultural powerhouses in their respective countries. The newly created Two Punjabs Centre, located in Chandigarh, capital of Indian Punjab, and supported by Pakistan's Lahore University of Management Sciences and India's Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, plans to study the two Punjabs' trade potential and carry out joint research in agriculture, health care, and industrial and infrastructure development. It also plans to sponsor cultural and literary events to create a "common basis" for trust complementing the agriculture and trade discussions. The initiative has the support of both provincial governments, and financial support from the Ford Foundation.

A second new institution, the World Punjabi Centre, has been established in the Indian city of Patiala to promote Punjabi culture. At the center's inauguration in February, proponents showcased new computer software that translates one Punjabi script to another. (The Punjabi written in Pakistan

uses an Arabic script, while the Punjabi in India uses a script derived from Sanskrit; the two scripts are not mutually intelligible, although the spoken language is the same). Talks are also underway to formalize educational exchanges between two universities in India's Punjab and two in Pakistan's Punjab, including a pair of agricultural colleges.

The arts are also playing a significant role in these ongoing exchanges. Performing artists help consolidate a common sense of Punjabi heritage by emphasizing local traditions that transcend religion. The Pakistani theater troupe Ajoka has performed works based on the eighteenth-century Sufi mystic Bulleh Shah, known for his philosophy of harmony among religions, as has the new Indian pop sensation Rabbi Shergill. Ajoka played to rave reviews on its first India tour in 2003, and again last June. Last March, Indian and Pakistani troupes collaborated on a week-long festival of Punjabi plays in Pakistan. Indian Punjabi pop superstar Daler Mehndi has performed to sold-out audiences in Pakistani Punjab. The World Punjabi Conference, a movement founded by the Pakistani *litterateur*-politician Fakhar Zaman, has convened well-attended literary conferences in India, Pakistan, and around the world. Since the first conference in 1996, the WPC's activities have gained momentum, and it now sponsors multiple events each year. Last year alone, the WPC hosted a conference in Pakistan in May, another in July to celebrate Waris Shah, and a third in India in September.

Filmmakers, too, have caught the Punjabin spirit. Only a few years ago, Bollywood was churning out Kashmir-focused hits with Pakistanis as the enemy. However, a recent Bollywood film, *Veer-Zara*, chronicles the love of an Indian Punjabi boy for a Pakistani Punjabi girl. And a recent Pakistani film, *Khamosh Pani*, takes as its subject the painful experience of partition in the Punjab, with Muslim and Sikh characters searching for answers to the mysteries surrounding their shared traumatic past.

The new spirit extends to the world of sports. In December 2004, the Punjab Games—a sort of grass-roots Olympiad featuring such traditional games as *kabbadi* (a contact sport) and tug-of-war—pitted teams from both Punjabs against each other in 12 different sports. The Indian Olympic Association has now created a permanent secretariat for the games, and the second round will take place in Lahore, Pakistan, this February. Meanwhile, the Punjab Cricket Association in India has hired the famed Pakistani spin bowler and former captain Intikhab Alam to coach the Indian Punjab team. Asked about his experiences coaching in India, Alam said that he did not consider himself foreign, that because he was born in India, in Hoshiarpur, “I am basically a Punjabi. The language is [the] same, the food and culture is [the] same.”

India and Pakistan have also agreed to begin new bus services linking cities in the two Punjabs. The first route, which (as of this writing) was scheduled to begin operating this January, will connect the major city of Indian Punjab, Amritsar, with the major city of Pakistani Punjab, Lahore. Amritsar and Lahore, only 25 miles apart, were once known as “twin cities,” but cross-border traffic has been held to a trickle for nearly 60 years. A second bus service, likely to begin once a hotel has been completed and a highway widened, will link Amritsar, the holy city of Sikhism, with Nankana Sahib in Pakistan, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, the religion’s founding saint.

Can the Two Punjabs Deliver?

Skeptics argue that while the two Punjabs are off to a promising start, their regional focus is too particularistic to have a strong effect on relations between India and Pakistan. How can literary gatherings and feel-good games of tug-of-war in Punjab lead to the normalization of relations between the two countries? Indeed, cultural diplomacy takes a back seat to traditional diplomacy when it comes to territorial disputes and

security concerns, so it is no coincidence that the two Punjabs effort has flowered at a time of rapprochement between New Delhi and Islamabad. Yet there are reasons why we ought to take a more optimistic view of Punjabinat’s possibilities: the movement directly addresses the problem of incompatible nationalisms; Punjabis wield disproportionate influence in both India and Pakistan; the effort has a potential demonstration effect; and there are growing domestic constituencies in both countries who desire a peaceful resolution of differences.

As Indiana University’s Sumit Ganguly has argued, at the core of the India-Pakistan confrontation is the issue of incompatible nationalities: one nonsectarian and the other Islamic. Indeed, were the dispute simply territorial, skilled negotiators could theoretically secure a settlement. But any lasting path to peace between India and Pakistan must find a way—amidst a number of highly contentious disputes, not least over disputed territory and water rights—to straightforwardly address the cognitive clash of nationalisms that has resulted in the “unending conflict.” The two-Punjabs model does precisely this, albeit on a small scale. Neither sidestepping nor seeking a rollback of partition, Punjabinat permits both sides equal claim to a shared past, creating neutral mechanisms for coexistence that do not require Punjabi citizens of India or Pakistan to subordinate their allegiance to their own countries.

Skeptics who point to the regional limitations of Punjabinat fail to consider the disproportionate influence the two Punjabs have within their own countries. Punjabis make up 50 percent of Pakistan’s population and constitute a disproportionate percentage of the army. According to the Brookings Institution’s Stephen P. Cohen, 75 percent of the army comes from just three districts in Punjab and two bordering districts in the Northwest Frontier Province. The officer corps, while more urban and diverse, remains disproportionately Punjabi as well.

Punjabi political and business elites dominate the public sphere. Although on the other side of the border Punjab is just one of India's 28 states, it projects considerable influence because of the configuration of India's current political leadership: the prime minister, the new army chief, and the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission (often called the "second most powerful man in India") are all Punjabi. Moreover, many of those involved in the Punjabinat effort have close ties to India's political leaders. To take just one example, the Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development counts among the members of its advisory board the prime minister, the foreign minister, one of India's leading industrialists, and one of India's top economists.

There is also a large and culturally active Punjabi diaspora, settled primarily in the United States, Britain, and Canada. The Academy of the Punjab in North America (APNA) and the closely related Punjab Heritage Foundation have taken up publishing projects (translating literature from one Punjabi script to another) to bring both Punjabs closer together. They have also convened numerous conferences focused on Punjabi culture and literature, explicitly emphasizing the commonalities across the two Punjabs. In 2001, APNA published in Pakistan the Sikh scriptures in an Arabic script, the first such ever to be printed.

Punjabinat can have a demonstration effect on other regions in India and Pakistan, leading to wider citizen exchanges between the two countries. India's Mumbai-based Sindhis have cultural roots in the Pakistani province of Sind. Sindhi, like Punjabi, boasts a rich literary heritage stemming from its Sufi traditions. The spiritual inclu-

siveness of Sindhi saints' poetry has appeal for both Muslim and Hindu Sindhis. Similar cultural connections could be forged between West Bengal and Bangladesh.

If India and Pakistan are ever to have normal relations, there will have to be sizeable vocal constituencies for peaceful coexistence on both sides of the border. Until now, Indian and Pakistani "peaceniks" have remained outside the mainstream, but this is beginning to change. In India, some foreign policy realists not previously known for harboring rosy views on Pakistan, like the leading strategic analyst C. Raja Mohan, now think Punjabinat can lead to improved relations. Assessing Pakistan's constituency for peace is much more difficult given the role of the army, which has justified its penetration of Pakistani politics by holding up India as a perpetual threat. But given the number of Punjabis in the military, there is reason to hope that Punjabinat may extend its influence even to the Pakistani army.

The Punjabinat movement has experienced gradual growth from the late 1990s onward by focusing on a celebration of a shared Punjabi heritage. Because its promoters have not sought to resolve disputes between India and Pakistan, Punjabinat has been able to foster ties of affection and fellow feeling between Punjabis on both sides of the border without the constant pressure to "show results." Although the expansion of people-to-people ties in the two Punjabs may not be enough in and of itself to guarantee peace between India and Pakistan, no long-term resolution to the disputes between the two countries will be possible until more and more ordinary people can look across the border and see not a hated enemy, but a kindred past. ●