

Punjab as a Model for Peace: A Report

Contributed by the Sikh Council on Religion & Education (USA)

Washington, March 31, 2007 - The prestigious American University held a panel discussion on the role Punjab can play to bridge the gap between the two rival nations of India and Pakistan. The event was the occasion to release Tridivesh Singh Maini's recent book "South Asian Cooperation and the Role of the Punjabs". According to Tridivesh Singh, "The book is an attempt to show the important role of the Punjabs not only within their respective countries but also in the South Asian context." The author carried out field research in both of the Punjabs and also interviewed policy makers, academics and peace activists on both sides.

"The main object of this book is to provide a corridor between India and Pakistan," said Maini. Other panelists were Mowahid Shah, senior advisor to the chief minister of Pakistan's Punjab Province; Shalini Venturelli, Nissim Reuben, American Jewish Committee; Dr. Rajwant Singh, Chairman, Sikh Council on Religion and Education; and diplomat in residence Anthony Quainton, Akbar Ahmed, Chair of the Islamic Studies, moderated the discussion. This was organized by the School of International Service at American University and was co-sponsored by the Sikh Council on Religion and Education.

This book, according to author, purviews all these aspects and turns the lens on to the role of the Punjabs (Indian and Pakistani) in "holistic" South Asian Cooperation. It is an endeavor to provide some refreshing solutions for cooperation, both in the context of the Punjabs and South Asia. It is a scholarly compiled document, which deals with SAARC and its achievements and notably the reasons for its failure. But the most noteworthy contribution is the portion pertaining to the relatively recent initiatives taken by the Two Punjabs. His recommendations include encouraging restriction free movement of peoples, building a well knit South Asian Economy, opening up transit facilities, important role of the private sector in SAARC, setting up Committees for Border Region Cooperation and encouraging Free Trade Zones in Border Areas. The book also quotes some relevant examples of such developments in many parts of the world and reflects what is gradually emerging particularly in case of closer cooperation within South Asia.

Maini presented that Punjab and its role is too often ignored in South Asian discourse in spite of its historic, geographical and cultural importance in the South Asian Context- it was the only region apart from Bengal to be partitioned. Punjab's potential as a political and economic corridor for Indo-Pak peace on the one hand and economic cooperation on the other has to be key element in bringing both parties close.

The importance of "Punjabi" as a syncretism culture and the message of peace and compassion spread by Baba Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, should be highlighted. This should be in response to the "Clash of Civilizations" paradigm, which is simplistic and problematic, and emphasized by many policy makers in Western capitals.

Creating "positive vested interests" in India and Pakistan for peace so as to counter the "negative ones", the two Punjabs can take the lead.

60 years ago when British India was partitioned into the separate nations of India and Pakistan, refugees flooded across the border and sectarian violence left up to 2 million dead. Akbar Ahmed was a four-year-old on a train full of Indian Muslims fleeing to Pakistan; Shalini Venturelli's parents were escaping the other way, abandoning their home in Lahore for India.

Ahmed and Venturelli, both faculty at the School of International Service (SIS) of American University, were among the panelists who gathered last week to discuss a new book by Tridivesh Singh Maini that finds a model of hope for South Asian cooperation and peace

building in one of the unintended results of partition.

With the 1947 partition, the region of Punjab was also split into Pakistani and Indian sections, leaving the Punjabi culture, which includes Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus, straddling the border of two mutually suspicious nations. Maini argues in *South Asian Cooperation and the Role of the Punjabs* (2007) that the region can be used to create “positive vested interests” through trade and other connections, allowing the two Punjabs to facilitate and serve as a model for a peaceful South Asia.

Ms. Venturelli prompted response from many panelists as well from the audience when she emphasized the need for more civil society involvement in strengthening democracy in Pakistan to bring sea change in its presence in the world affairs and its economy. Economic prosperity and technological advance in both India and Pakistan are key to bringing peace in the region, she stressed.

Dr. Akbar Ahmed, Professor of Islamic Studies and former Pakistani Ambassador to United Kingdom, also spoke about Sufism and its relevance for South Asia. He also talked about the adversity faced by the people who are interested in reconciliation in both sides of the border in South Asia. He stressed that Pakistan has the model of true democracy showed by its founder, Jinnah, which supports the individual rights as well the respect for cultural and religious diversity.

Dean Goodman, Dean School of International Service, American University spoke about his association with the author of the book and talked about the relevance of the book in today’s context.

Mowahid Hussein, Advisor to the Pakistani Punjab CM, Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi talked about looking at each other as equals and not indulging in mud slinging. He quoted Sufi couplets and also mentioned Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and emphasized how these two traditions have showed the message of peace, compassion and understanding. Hussein talked about the initiatives taken by governments of both the Punjabs to improve relations. He talked about his visits to Indian Punjab and praised Captain Amarinder Singh former Indian Punjab CM and Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi for the foresight they showed in pushing Punjab-Punjab initiatives.

Dr. Rajwant Singh, praised the Pakistani Government for its gestures to Sikh community in recent years. He mentioned that Pakistan Government issued a stamp marking the 400th anniversary of fifth Guru’s martyrdom last year. Pak Government has also declared Nankana Sahib as a district which would bring more investment and development. It has also announced the creation of an university in the region. These steps certainly are helpful bringing the communities together. Dr. Singh also announced that SCORE will organize an Inter Faith Prayer Service to mark the 60th anniversary of formation of Pakistan and India to pay respects to all people who lost their lives in communal riots. This would be a moment of prayer and reconciliation.

Tridivesh Singh Main has a Bachelors degree from Sheffield University (UK) and Masters degree from American University(USA). He is currently working with the private sector in New Delhi, India. Earlier, he was a consultant for the World Bank and a researcher for the American Security Council Foundation.

The book was released in India by Shekhar Gupta, Editor-In-Chief, Indian Express, New Delhi and in Pakistan by Chaudhry Aitzaz Ahsan, Former Interior Minister and MNA from the PPP.

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