

THE OPENING OF THE KARTARPUR CORRIDOR IS A POSITIVE STEP

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Instances of promises made and delivered are rare in the mostly fraught India-Pakistan relations. Much of the last seven decades since Partition has been a story of zero-sum games that have kept us apart. In that limited sense, the agreement to have a corridor linking Gurdaspur's Dera Baba Nanak to Kartarpur Sahib is a welcome augury. The 16th century shrine in what is now Pakistan's Narowal district was where the founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, breathed his last.

Located four kilometres away on the banks of the River Ravi, the revered shrine is visible from the Indian side. If all goes well, it will be easily accessible to devotees for whom it has been a case of so near yet so far. Of as much satisfaction is the fact that the corridor entente has happened in the run-up to the 550th birthday of the first Sikh Guru. For his part, Pakistan Prime Minister, Imran Khan, took a personal interest in meeting the Sikh demand after Navjot Sidhu attended his swearing-in ceremony in Islamabad. Both practising politicians now, their friendship goes back to their cricketing days.

Mr Sidhu earned goodwill in Pakistan but faced flak at home for attending Mr Khan's inaugural; more so for the hug he got and gave to Pakistan's army chief, Qamar Javed Bajwa, who conveyed to him Islamabad's willingness to open the corridor to Kartarpur. That partisan political play has since translated into a race for claiming credit. The NDA, of which the Akali Dal is a part, wants to show itself as the deliverer of the long-pending Sikh demand. There were embarrassing moments for the Dal and the Congress at Monday's ground breaking ceremony performed by vice-president, Venkaiah Naidu, and Punjab chief minister, Amarinder Singh.

But Amarinder Singh, invited by the Pakistan prime minister, refused to attend a similar ceremony across the border. By so deciding, he sought to associate both with the faithful who are hopeful as also sharing the sceptics' fears that Islamabad's gesture could be a ploy to revive the Khalistan movement.

The Centre's response to Mr Khan's invitation hasn't been any different. External affairs minister, Sushma Swaraj opted out, citing prior engagements. But two junior central ministers will travel to Pakistan: the Akali Dal's Harsimrat Kaur and the BJP's Hardeep Puri. They're both Sikhs, the latter a former diplomat. As the one who first pushed the corridor proposal, Mr Sidhu won't be on the official delegation. He will travel to Pakistan as Mr Khan's friend.

If it was offended by the scaled-down participation, Pakistan did not show; it welcomed India's response. As Guru Nanak said: Everything happens by God's grace.

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