

## Book Review

**Tridivesh Singh Maini**, *The South Asian Cooperation and the Role of the Punjabs* (New Delhi: Siddharth Publications, **2007**) pp. 180. **ISBN: 81-7220-186-9**

'The South Asian Cooperation and the Role of the Punjabs' by Tridivesh Singh Maini is another addition to the growing number of books on South Asian Cooperation and India-Pakistan Relations. This book, however, is a departure, as it looks at the South Asian Cooperation and India-Pakistan relations through the prism of the relationship between Indian-Punjab and Pakistan-Punjab. It is also equally important to bear in mind that the author belongs to post-India--Pakistan Partition generation and, therefore, does not carry the mindset of hate, which is the likely baggage carried by Pre-Partition generation. His perspective, therefore, is important, as it is his generation that would be the beneficiary of any improvement of bilateral ties between India and Pakistan and also SAARC acquiring strength, and any meaningful role in the South Asian region.

In full justification of the title of the book, the author has neatly divided the book into two parts – South Asian Cooperation and the Role of the Punjabs. Furthermore, each part is again further sub-divided and looks at various aspects and factors, which contribute towards the improvement or become hindrances in the furtherance of relationship between the countries and the region. The Part dealing with South Asian Cooperation serves as a backdrop, to enable full understanding and comprehension of the interplay and the dynamics of the ongoing relationship between the Two Punjabs, on the India-Pakistan Peace Process.

The author is looking for an “out of the box” approach, as he clearly states in the Preface to the Book. He, however, dismisses the bureaucracy, as being incapable in finding “creative and innovative solutions”, which were the need of the hour. On the other hand, he blames the bureaucrats for creating the mess in South Asia. If this alone was the cause, solution could have been easily found, as bureaucrats can be made to perform also. The author, however, recognizes that the complexities of the problem, as he admits that in deciding to write this Book, he had undertaken a stupendous task, which would be “to strike a balance between economics, politics and culture on the one hand and between emotions and reality on the other”.

While looking at the SAARC and its achievements, the author comes to the conclusion that SAARC as a bloc had not succeeded in achieving its objective and was still a long way from fulfilling its potential, of becoming a powerful regional Bloc. We are used to living with our potentials in every field. He raises the questions, whether it is the South Asian character, which is inimical to regional cooperation or other issues, like the Kashmir, are militating against regional cooperation. Like the other critics of SAARC, the author holds uneasy relationship between India and Pakistan, primarily responsible for this lack of progress. Hence, the author urges on the need for an “out of the box” thinking by the experts on a feasible regional model for South Asia. This could

be a combination of the functional and development integration approaches. He considers, Southern African Development Corporation (SADC), as an appropriate model, which would allow for gradual and incremental increase in the improvement of relationship at the Regional level. Having been associated with the Southern Africa Development Cooperation Process, right from its inception in late 1970's, modeling SAARC in the SADC mould does not appear to be the solution. While lamenting the progress of Regional Cooperation, the author sees certain positive signs in the recent statements of the leaders in South Asia, as positive factors, which had led to the establishment of SAFTA, SAARC Development Fund etc.

The author highlights the urgency for SAARC emerging "as a regional Block of substance". He suggests the need for promoting a four point formula, which is cataloging a set of recommendations that had emerged from SAFMA and other individual experts. These, *inter alia*, include easing of visa restrictions for specific interest groups, removal of trade barriers, improving connectivity by road and rail and allowing for cooperation between border regions. The author considers the above as the "most realistic" road map towards South Asian cooperation. Nobody can dispute the merits of these suggestions but these still beg the question, as to when these would be able to stand the test of reality and become operational?

Coming to the role of the Punjab-Punjab relations, the author reflects on the hypothesis that the two Punjabs were becoming key players in "the South Asian rapprochement". In support of his argument, he points out the strategic location of the Punjabs and the perceptions of the experts on the role the Two Punjabs had been playing in promoting people-to-people linkages among various groups and interests. He recalls some of the steps taken in this regard, such as the holding of the Punjab Games at Patiala in December 2004, the World Punjabi Congress, the commencement of Bus Service between Amritsar-Lahore in January 2006, and the commencement of the Bus Service between Amritsar and Nankana Sahib in May 2006 and the opening of the Wagah road border for trade in certain commodities. He considers trade and commerce via these borders, emerging as the best confidence building measures. He lauds the role played by various groups, such as SAFMA, The Two Punjabs Centre, Farmers Associates Pakistan, Lahore University of Management etc. in promoting such connectivity.

The author's confidence on this route is largely based on his belief that Punjab-Punjab Relations have been built on a different kind of mind-set, which has its moorings in the so-called 'Punjabiyaat', an identity based on shared culture, language, traditions, which unites Punjabis from India and Pakistan. This 'Punjabiyaat', which gets manifested easily abroad among the Punjabis from India and Pakistan, is also becoming a moving force in the ongoing dialogue at various levels – official and non-official between the Two Punjabs. A welcome development in this regard is that this increasing cooperation is not considered as inimical to the peace process by the leadership in India and Pakistan. He recognizes the paramount role of Culture in underpinning those ties, which get further bolstered up, through convergence of economic interests in agriculture, trade, industry and tourism.

The author has listed a number of recent initiatives taken in this regard, with the support of the then Chief Minister of Punjab (India) and the Chief Minister of Punjab (Pakistan), resulting in the steady opening of relationship at the people-to-people in the arena of culture and sports. This process has gradually started moving into other areas and directions. He compliments the two Chief Ministers, who carefully guided the process, taking into account the dynamics of national policies and thereby striking “fine balance between emotion and reality”. The author further notes the positive role, which the Punjabi Diaspora from both the sides, could play in this regard.

Finally, the author ventures into an Agenda for the Future, noting that the achievements so far had been “just a drop in the Ocean”. He would like to see the Punjab-Punjab relationship becoming “the backbone of South Asian Cooperation”. It is indeed a laudable objective and would be great, if we could start this, even with respect to India-Pakistan relations. Are the leaders prepared to show “generosity and flexibility”, which the author would like them to do.

What are the author’s key recommendations in any case? We return to the same old track - Free Movement (easing out visa procedures) and opening up trade routes and re-establishing old links, improving communication facilities at the national level, formation of a joint trade office at Wagah and setting up a Joint Punjab Chamber of Commerce. At the political level, the author seeks understanding from different levels to the Punjab-Punjab Process, such as the Federal Governments and the non-Punjabis. Simultaneously, he also urges on the need for strengthening ‘Punjabiyaat’ on both the sides, with the active involvement of organizations/individuals at the grassroots level.

Extrapolating the dynamics of the Punjab-Punjab Cooperation in the South Asian context, the author would like to see Free Movement of People, building of a well-knit South Asian Economy, Opening of Transit Facilities, Increasing Role of Private Sector Border Regions Cooperation, Setting up of Free Trade Zones in Border Areas and involving South Asian Diaspora in the Development Process. The author recognizes the likely difficulties and the pitfalls and, therefore, he returns to his caveat, that is, the need of blending emotion and reality.

What is the author’s final conclusion? He ends with a prayer, a wish or a challenge, as you may wish to see, in these words, “Let us truly make this South Asian Country and get rid of the dogmas and stigmas of the past”. This would turn out to be an ambitious task, as the world is still not reconciled to an Asian Century. The author, however, leaves it to the experts and the political leadership, to fulfill his prayer or meet the challenge. Will they come up to his expectations and answer his call and fulfill his prayer? Does the Peace Process still remain captive to the old mindset? Have we moved beyond the new catchalls of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, like “Making the boundaries irrelevant” and “Thinking out of the Box”, which have been fully embraced by the author?

Can we place Punjab-Punjab Cooperation Process in the category of “Thinking out of the Box” solution -- a people-oriented approach from the bottom to the top? If so, we would need to capture its spirit and put this into the Box. It is a stupendous task,

which we have ourselves seen from our own efforts at the Two Punjabs Centre. This is a slow Process, which has to move in tandem with the openings provided at the Federal level, but a Process. This has to be garnered and could become a catalyst for improvement of India-Pakistan relations and also for a better future for South Asia. The author, therefore, needs to be commended in his efforts, in focusing on this new development, with all his hopes and fears, for a bright future, while he adds his footnote of caution.

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