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Patidars for OBC quota: Is Hardik Patel actually spearheading an anti-reservation movement?

India (/category/india) Sandip Roy (https://www.firstpost.com/author/roy) Aug 27, 2015 10:57:32 IST

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As the Patels gathered for their *maha*-rally in Ahmedabad, a friend in that city posted on Facebook:

"Under almost house arrest as the Patels arriving in their fancy cars rally for a right to be "backward". All roads nearby my house are closed for traffic."



(https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Hardik-Patel-PTI)

The irony of what appears to be a very affluent community gathering in the thousands demanding reservations has left most of us on the outside scratching our heads.

A report on *Quartz* (<http://qz.com/487069/the-affluent-patel-clan-owns-a-quarter-of-us-motels-in-india-they-want-to-be-called-backward/>) sums up what it dubs the "Caste Conundrum" in its very headline.

The affluent Patel clan owns a quarter of US motels. In India, it wants to be called "backward".

A 2012 book about the US motel industry reckons there are some 22,000 hotels and motels owned by Indians in the US, together valued at \$128 billion. 70% of these are owned by Gujaratis. Three-quarters of those are Patels.

And it does not particularly help the Patels' cause as victims when one of the rally-goers, one Suryakant Patel tells *The Hindu*, "I had to sell my land to educate my son, who could not get admission in medical college here. I had to send him to the US to study computer science."

As columnist Aakar Patel tells *The Los Angeles Times* (<http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-india-patels-anxious-20150824-story.html>) "It's laughable. They have had access to modernity and capital for a century and a

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person in central Gujarat, where Patels dominate, has family members in the US and UK."

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The Los Angeles Times headlines its story “*Patels are a success story from India to the US. Why do they want affirmative action?*”

But do they really?

It's interesting to really listen to what Hardik Patel, the twenty-two year-old who seems to be spearheading the agitation has to say (<http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-india-patels-angry-20150824-story.html>).

“Either the government grants us reservation or discontinues the entire concept of reservation. These is no other option.”

Our focus has been largely on the first half of his statement trying to fathom why such a well-to-do community should be demanding reservation. But it is really the second half of his “either-or” statement that is likely to catch fire.

In the name of demanding reservations is Hardik Patel really spearheading an anti-reservation movement?

What he has said is that he's OK with reservations as long as they are linked to economic status not caste. This is an idea that finds great resonance in modern India where many feel the job pie has not grown the way the reservation pool has.

That sentiment comes through clearly from Haribhai Patel who came to the Mahakranti rally. He tells the *Indian Express* (<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/voices-at-patidar-rally-had-i-belonged-to-obc-things-would-have-been-different/>):

“My son did diploma in engineering, but couldn't get a good job. He now runs his own shop but the earning is not good enough. Had I belonged to OBC category, things would have been different.”

And then the clincher.

“I believe that the time has come to give reservation on the basis of economic condition rather than caste.”

It's not a new idea or a new grouse. The BJP too had put “*aarthik aadhar par*” (<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/caste-and-the-parivar/>)” reservations in its manifesto way back in 1996. The United States has also struggled with the notion of economic affirmative action that would benefit poor whites as opposed to race-based quotas which have been challenged in court.

Focusing on the Patels' affluence, their diamond and textile businesses and farmlands, misreads the reality of that resentment which is not related to what they have but what they feel their children are shut out from.

Hardik Patel in his address to the rally says that Nitish Kumar in Bihar is “one of us” as is Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh. He is appealing to a larger brotherhood of Patidars which he claims is really 27 crore.

But the logic of a society based on pure merit actually has takers far beyond the Patels, 27 crore or not.

Christophe Jaffrelot writes in the *Indian Express* (<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/caste-and-the-parivar/>) that the RSS has described caste-based reservations as divisive and unfair to the meritorious and upper caste poor. When V P Singh tried to implement the Mandal report in 1989-90, *The Organizer* wrote “The havoc the politics of reservation is playing with the social fabric is unimaginable. It provides a premium for mediocrity, encourages brain-drain and sharpens caste-divide.” The self-immolation protests that shook the

country in those days show that that resentment never simmers too far below the surface. Those movements agitated against the reservation tent to try and dismantle it. Hardik Patel is agitating to become part of the tent knowing that if everyone gets reservation, it will collapse under its own weight.

There is obviously a larger philosophical debate to be had about the issue and it will never yield clear consensus. In a very competitive job market, the Patel who finds he is unable to get into that coveted engineering college while the OBC candidate does will not be able to calmly digest that as corrective social justice for centuries of caste-based oppression. The OBC candidate will point to how much the weight of history and the institutional advantage the upper caste has and does not acknowledge. But to the candidate in the examination centre, that weight is invisible. What's visible are the marksheets and the names on the admission rolls in college. If there were enough seats at that college or the job market to go around for everyone, those with affirmative action and those without, it would be a different story. "A Patidar student with 90% marks does not get admission in an MBBS course, while SC/ST or OBC students get it with 45% marks," says (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Who-is-Hardik-Patel/listshow/48663994.cms>) Hardik. He himself graduated with less than 50% marks from an Ahmedabad college which puts him even further back in the line. But he is tapping into an old emotive faultline with his complaint.

The danger of the Hardik Patel-led agitation is that it will blow open this can of worms in the most explosive manner imaginable. Already Hardik uses language that is incendiary. "We are following the way shown by Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel, but we can also go the Bhagat Singh way." He poses with guns. He talks about Patels seizing their rights if they are not given them.

Gujarat is struggling to contain the fallout. There are bandhs in the state. 3G has been disconnected. The political analysts are puzzled about how a 22-year-old political nonentity could draw this kind of mammoth crowd to a rally about an issue that is hardly groundbreaking. Even Arvind Kejriwal built up his resume by cutting his political teeth with Anna Hazare. Why are lakhs of Patels putting their trust blindly in this 22-year-old B.Com graduate with no particular political expertise? Could a Hardik Patel grow so big without political backing somewhere? Hardik insists he is apolitical. But in a state that is as tightly under BJP control as Gujarat, led by Narendra Modi's handpicked successor Anandiben Patel, why has this young man not been nipped in the bud?

Narendra Modi was once asked about the clamour for caste based reservation. He replied (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bHzEez7Q0I>) with a variation of his *sabka saath sabka vikas mantra*. "Education facility for each and everyone, then who will ask for the reservation? If the job opportunities are there for all, who will ask for reservation? So we have to create era of the plenty... Because our whole economic system is a scarcity system. We have to convert it from scarcity to plenty. And Gujarat is a model for plenty."

The question now is whether the Patel Maha Kranti rally in Gujarat could become the "model" for something else - a much larger national conversation about the very basis of reservations itself.

What begins with the Patels need not stay confined to the Patels.

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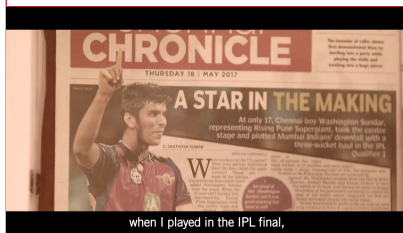
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Editor's note: This article is the second of a two-part series analysing the agrarian crisis in India, in light of the various marches and protests undertaken by farmers in recent months to highlight their problems.

The agrarian crisis did not happen overnight. As a Niti Aayog report shows

(http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/DOUBLING%20FARMERS%20INCOME.pdf), the problem started after 1991-92 — until then, both farm and non-farm sectors grew at the same level. After 1991-92, the non-farm sectors took off to a higher growth trajectory (following economic liberalisation) to more than 8 percent while the farm sector remained stuck, with the long-term growth trend of a mere 2.8 percent.

Liberalisation opened up agriculture trade but did little else. Broadly speaking, three key policy challenges were identified for this (<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/162144/files/1-Arora.pdf>): a sharp decline in output growth, steady decline in public sector investment in agriculture and a need to improve competitiveness in the agro-food chain by enhancing efficiency in production, marketing and agro-processing.

The decline in investment is arguably the most critical part. Starting with the National Agriculture Policy of 2000, several policy measures have been taken to improve investment, particularly encourage private investment, but the decline continues. The Agriculture Statistics of 2017

(http://agricoop.nic.in/sites/default/files/pocketbook_0.pdf) shows that while public investment has remained more or less static between 2011-12 and 2016-17 – 0.3 to 0.4 percent of GDP (based on 2011-12 series, at market price) – private investment has progressively gone down from 2.7 to 1.8 percent, dragging the overall investment from 3.1 percent of GDP in 2011-12 to 2.2 percent in 2016-17.

One of the policy measures adopted to overcome this has been to improve credit supply to agriculture. The Economic Survey of 2014-15 (<https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2015-2016/es2014-15/echapter-vol1.pdf>) showed that agriculture credit increased substantially since the turn of the century – annual growth rate going up from 8 percent in 1981-91 to 17.8 percent in 2001-2011 – but it also pointed out that “there has been a sharp increase in the share of large-sized loans...which warrants scrutiny”.



Study of the RBI data by R Ramakumar of TISS showed that the share of direct agriculture loans of less than Rs 2 lakh (in the total amount disbursed) progressively went down from 86.2 percent in 1990 to 44.3 percent in 2010.

(<https://www.sundarayya.org/sites/default/files/papers/ramakumar.pdf>) At the end of March 2017 (up to which data is available), the RBI data

(<https://dbie.rbi.org.in/BOE/OpenDocument/1608101727/OpenDocument/opendoc/openDocument.faces?logonSuccessful=true&shareId=2>) shows that this has gone further down to 40.28 percent – meaning that a larger share of credit continues to go to rich farmers and agri-businesses, rather than small and marginal farmers – which is the policy objective of liberalising credit disbursement norms.

While we are on loans to farmers, here is some food for thought. Every time farmers' loans are waived, bankers and economists go ballistic. No less than RBI governor Urjit Patel reacted sharply

(<https://www.livemint.com/Politics/FLWzWep1Jdv8riZhMLNbtL/RBI-governor-Urjit-Patel-criticises-farm-loan-waiver-schemes.html>) to it by saying (in April 2017) that farm loan waivers “undermine an honest credit culture”, “increasing cost of borrowing for others” and “eventually affect national balance sheet”. In sharp contrast, no one

of any significance has ever uttered such harsh words when corporate loans are written off as NPAs – which is routine and much higher in magnitude and thus pose a far greater risk to the economy and credit culture, by Patel's own logic. Here is how.

According to the RBI's 2017 report Operations and Performance of Commercial Banks (<https://rbi.org.in/Scripts/PublicationsView.aspx?id=18061>), agriculture's share in the total bank NPAs stood at a mere 8.3 percent (or Rs 60,200 crore) while that of the non-priority sector (industry and infrastructure) was a whopping 76.7 percent (Rs 5,58,500 crore) at the end of March 2017. At the end of March 2016, the situation was similar – agriculture's share of NPAs was a mere 8.6 percent (Rs 48,800 crore) against that of the non-priority sector's 75.2 percent (Rs 4,25,700 crore). So, which loan waiver should raise the eyebrows of policy makers, economists and bankers – farm or non-farm?

Another key policy thrust in agriculture has been to provide crop insurance to protect farmers from natural calamities – another major cause of farm distress. The Centre for Science and Environment assessed the flagship Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (http://cdn.cseindia.org/attachments/0.99958400_1505369720_Pradhan-Mantri-Fasal-Bima-Yojana-Report.pdf) (PMFBY) and found several flaws – sum insured is substantially lower than the scale of finance (cost of cultivation plus some profit) reducing farmers' claims; inadequate and delayed claim payment; delayed payment of premium by states; negligible coverage of sharecroppers and tenants etc.

There is yet another issue. In the last two years, 2016-17 and 2017-18, the difference between the premiums received and the compensations paid by the insurance companies amounts to Rs 16,000 crore – according to the Union agriculture ministry data accessed through an RTI (<https://thewire.in/agriculture/pm-crop-insurance-scheme-huge-profits-private-insurers>). Farmers pay only 1.5 to 5 percent of the premium while the rest is shared equally by the Centre and states. The question is: Should this money not be put to better use by investing in agriculture instead of handing over to the insurance companies (all of which are now private) as profit?

Raising farmers' income is yet another policy debacle. On multiple occasions, the Niti Aayog has said the avowed policy of the government to double it by 2022 is not possible and that the real income of farmers has been declining between 2011-12 and 2015-16 (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/agriculture/it-may-take-at-least-25-years-to-double-farmers-income-study-61454> & <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/doubling-farm-income-by-2022-not-possible-niti/386310.html>). Doubling the income would require output growth to be accelerated by 33 percent and a higher price realisation – the Niti Aayog said in its policy paper of 2017 (<http://agricoop.nic.in/sites/default/files/NITI%20Aayog%20Policy%20Paper.pdf>).

The rise in minimum support price (MSP) as a direct method of higher price realisation has not kept pace with the rise in input costs for years and hence, the demand to implement the Swaminathan Commission formula continues. Moreover, in absence of commensurate public procurement, market prices remain below MSP, both post-kharif and post-rabi harvests, making a mockery of higher MSP. A recent report (there are, in fact, many such reports throughout this year) shows that the prices of cereal, paddy, oilseed and cotton crashed in more than 1,700 markets in October (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/agriculture/more-than-60-markets-sell-agricultural-produce-below-msp-61921>). This also demonstrates that the market reforms have failed to bring better price realisation to farmers.

On the other hand, input costs have been going up. Except for urea, which is under government control, the prices of other fertilisers, seeds, herbicides, pesticides and diesel routinely go up and the government can do nothing about it, having de-controlled these items as a part of the liberalisation process. How does one increase

farmers' income if neither input costs nor output prices can be managed by the government or market?

This leaves another critical issue: land. The overwhelming presence of small and marginal landholdings and landless (92.82 percent as per the last NSSO data

(http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Report_571_15dec15_2.pdf)) – which are on a nosedive – are not only bad for productivity but also bad for institutional credit, insurance and other government support.

To overcome this, the Niti Aayog has come out with a 'model agricultural land leasing law' for the states to follow (T Haque committee report

(http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/Final_Report_Expert_Group_on_Land_Leasing.pdf)).

Implementing this model law would need the states (land is a state subject) to amend their land laws, particularly those relating to tenancy rights. So far, this is a non-starter and the future does not seem particularly bright since hardly any farmer with surplus land is expected to risk giving land on long-term lease (which is essential to make an investment on land for better productivity). Who will guarantee that the tenancy rights will not be restored in the long term?

The only meaningful land reform attempted — after zamindari was abolished, land ceiling was imposed and surplus and wasteland was distributed among the landless in the first three decades after independence — is the Forest Rights Act of 2006. It gave ownership rights over the forest land and forest resources to the tribals and other forest dwellers, who have been residing in these forests for generations but their rights have not been officially recorded.

It should have been implemented in two years (by 2008). But, according to the latest update from the tribal affairs ministry (<https://tribal.gov.in/FRA/data/MPRAug2018.pdf>), as on 31 August, 2018, only 44.6 percent of 'claims' have been granted so far – not to talk of the 'potential' lost due to lack of awareness among the tribals about their rights (particularly the community forest rights) and reluctance of the state governments and their forest departments to do an honest job of it.

To conclude, the above narration is by no means exhaustive but is an attempt to provide a big picture to put the agrarian crisis in perspective and highlight the inadequacies of the policy responses to it. Evidently, sops, half-hearted measures or political skulduggery would make no difference. What is needed is a macroeconomic vision, accompanied with appropriate policies, plans and strategies. This would essentially involve an overhauling of the existing mechanisms which have spectacularly failed to take care of half of India's workforce and more than two-thirds of its population who are agriculture dependent. Until that happens, farmers, landless and tribals have no option other than periodically marching to the seats of power.

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India (/category/india) Syed Ata Hasnain (<https://www.firstpost.com/author/syed-ata-hasnain>) Nov 28, 2018 17:23:28 IST

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The 50 Rashtriya Rifles is one of the most prolific units of the Indian Army deployed in a crucial part of the counter-terror grid in South-Central Kashmir. It is responsible for the security of the corridor along the Nowgam-Pulwama Road between Pampore and the airport, extending to the east of the national highway. Here, in its area of responsibility — a veritable hell-hole as far as terrorist concentration is concerned — Naveed Jatt was reported to be hiding.

A swift operation conducted in coordination with the Jammu and Kashmir Police and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) ensured that two terrorists were killed at Chattergam in Budgam district (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/budgam-encounter-let-terrorist-naveed-jatt-accused-of-killing-rising-kashmir-editor-shujaat-bukhari-neutralised-in-jammu-and-kashmir-5629421.html>), including Jatt.

Who is Naveed Jatt? A top Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) commander who has been operating in the Valley since 2012, he shot to prominence after his daring escape (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/srinagars-shri-maharaja-hari-singh-hospital-attacked-amid-chaos-captured-let-terrorist-abu-hanzula-escapes-4337765.html>) from the Shri Maharaja Hari Singh Civil Hospital in Srinagar on 6 February, 2018, where he had been taken for medical treatment under police escort after his arrest in 2014. But much more importantly, Jatt was identified as the man who, after his escape, led the hit squad that gunned down prominent journalist and chief editor of *Rising Kashmir*, Shujaat Bukhari, on 14 June.

Security forces, with some excellent coordination between the Rashtriya Rifles, the Special Operations Group of the state police and the CRPF, have eliminated as many as 222 terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir this year. This was not by any new strategy but a continuation of the basics in a far more refined and coordinated manner. Operation All Out, which commenced last year, set a high in the joint strategy of the security forces. The 222 figure is the best security forces came to in the past decade in the Valley.



For interest, it is good to know that in 13 days since 15 November, 22 terrorists have been neutralised in Jammu and Kashmir. In the same month in 1999, a total of 45 terrorists had been gunned down in the same areas of South Kashmir. However, to the credit of the current campaign, the strength of terrorists in the Valley is estimated to be not more than 300 to 350, with the majority of them in South Kashmir. In 1999, their strength was anywhere between 2,000 to 3,000 terrorists.

The creditable aspect here is the fact that security forces did not lose their focus from eliminating terrorist leaders with regularity. On 27 November, Shakir Hassan Dar, deputy to high-profile terrorist Zakir Musa, who is the head of al Qaeda-affiliate Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind, was killed at the core centre of terror in Kashmir, Pulwama district's Tral sector (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/jammu-and-kashmir-militant-killed-in-encounter-in-pulwamas-tral-suspected-to-be-from-zakir-musa-led-group-5623171.html>). Elimination of terrorist leaders puts the cadres in a quandary as most of them are greenhorns who do not have much idea about planning and executing such operations. They become easy prey to the operations of the security forces.

In 2011, one of the longest-surviving LeT terrorist leaders, Abdulla Uni, was killed in a focused operation in Sopore, in which a joint team had tracked him for some time. His elimination created a major flux in terrorist ranks, as did the killing of 18 other leaders that year, leading terrorist leaders to make desperate attempts to infiltrate the Valley. Many of them were eliminated in counter-infiltration operations along the LoC. Security forces have used the same strategy most effectively the past two years with good results.

The high achievement in terms of anti-terrorist operations could not have been possible without the continuous flow of actionable intelligence. To offset such exchange of information, terror groups initiated a campaign to target Special Police Officers (SPO), most of whom live in villages and are the eyes and ears of the Jammu and Kashmir Police — the main intelligence provider because of its connect with local residents. A large number of SPOs and former SPOs were abducted and killed (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/militants-abduct-and-kill-former-spo-in-jammu-and-kashmirs-shopian-third-civilian-killing-by-terrorists-in-one-week-5608621.html>) to create a fear psychosis in the police ranks. When this did not entirely succeed, the terror groups, in the past couple of weeks, switched their focus on the local youth, who they suspect have been instrumental in the flow of intelligence. It is to the credit of the local youth that despite intimidation attempts through social media (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/amid-rising-encounters-in-kashmir-jihadists-resort-to-islamic-state-like-tactics-to-instil-fear-ensure-deference-from-locals-5609491.html>) video posts of abducted youth being executed, the flow of intelligence has not dried up. The recent successes in anti-terror operations are a result of these intelligence sources.

In the dynamic environment of the security situation in Kashmir, terrorists, under the guidance of their handlers across the LoC, change their strategy from time to time, but they don't lose their initiative. However, if the coordination and cooperation between security forces is of a high order, counter-measures are usually speedily adopted. Since 2015, the phenomenon most noticeable has been the attempt to intimidate security forces once they are informed about the presence of a terrorist hideout. To prevent the forces from closing in on the target hideout, mobs are gathered through social media and the forces are subjected to stone-pelting. The CRPF handles this attempt at intimidation and has become proficient in it.

It is also good to be aware that in nearly all operations, the terrorists are given a chance to surrender before the forces begin their process of neutralisation. In a recent operation in Kulgam, a young local terrorist was convinced to surrender, even as the Pakistani terrorist holed up with him refused to do so and was killed.

While these operations are achieving significant results, it must be remembered that more efforts need to be made to prevent local recruitment. As many as 164 local youth picked up the gun this year. Coupled with some successful infiltration from across the LoC, the vacuum created by the 222 terrorists killed has nearly been filled, thus allowing the terror movement to continue. The key to the winning formula is to neutralise far more than can be recruited or infiltrated into Kashmir. That, coupled with effective outreach and quality governance, will ensure a peaceful future in Jammu and Kashmir.

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SAARC is dead in water; Pakistan's 'invitation' to India is simple posturing for a smooth IMF bailout

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It's amazing to say the least, that newspapers in both India and Pakistan published exactly the same story word for word, stating that the Pakistan Foreign Office had invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the presumably, 19th SAARC Summit to be held in Pakistan. First and foremost, nobody really needs to invite anyone else. If a SAARC summit is to be held, then the prime minister will attend it as a member, if he so decides. An invite is a mere formality, and it is not the prerogative of the chair to invite or dis-invite anyone.

The point, of course, is whether the SAARC summit will take place at all. The actual 19th summit to be held in Pakistan in November 2016 was "postponed" after India, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Bangladesh (not Sri Lanka and the Maldives) informed Nepal, who was then the chair, of their inability to participate. The issue was the horrific attack on Uri Army camp on 18 September, 2016, which killed 17 Indian army personnel, and was arguably one of the worst terrorist attacks in years. India and the others felt rightly, that it was rather a farce to talk of cooperation between nations, when at least one of them was still backing and training terrorists, in this case, the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM).



File image of Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan.
Reuters

It's not that all SAARC activities closed down with this snub to Pakistan. As the Ministry of External Affairs notes, the “postponement” was followed by several SAARC meetings, including the informal council of ministers meeting in 2017, meeting of home ministers, and sundry other meetings which continued till the most recent council meeting on the sidelines of the 73rd UN General Assembly, and the upcoming meeting of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry which is to meet at Islamabad soon. Indeed, the current SAARC secretary general is a

Pakistani diplomat.

The “invite” therefore is really Islamabad’s trial balloon to see if a SAARC meeting can be held. Normally, the meeting would have been slated for November. Even then, should it have decided to hold a summit, December is still too early to organise such an event, particularly since its poll time for Bangladesh. India’s own general elections are due in mid 2019, with Modi expected to be on a what seems set to be a killing canvassing schedule by any standards. On the notional assumption that the present government may bow out, it’s surprising that Islamabad should even want a regional conference.

But most importantly, there is no indication that terrorism from Pakistan has at all abated. The attack on the Nirankari sect, specific reports of a JeM module targeting Delhi, and the continuing influx of terrorists into Kashmir, all points to the fact that the circumstances that led to the cancellation of the last summit still holds good. As seen from this view point, it makes no sense to hold a summit at this juncture.

But there are some important issues here. Over a period of time, SAARC has brought in as many observers as there are members. This includes the US, Iran, European Union, Mauritius, Japan, South Korea, Myanmar and China.

China is the main issue in this group. Beijing has recently kick-started a China South Asia Cooperation Forum in June this year which included all the SAARC members. India chose to send its Consul General in Guangzhou, and the event seemed, according to media accounts, to have been a much lauded success, with the Chinese appreciating India’s presence to the full. Though the forum is beginning to look more and more like SAARC, with Chinese cash backing it, New Delhi seems to have no major objection.

There’s a second issue. Though SAARC has been a persistent underachiever, it has been part of the present government’s centrepiece in a “neighbourhood first” policy. Some significant progress has therefore taken place including the South Asia Satellite launch, the SAARC disaster Management Centre in Gandhinagar, and a significant encouragement to industry to ramp up business.

Unfortunately, there are also significant hiccups, such as the ambitious connectivity plan that seemed to be on track after all members — barring Pakistan — signed the Motor Vehicles Agreement in 2015. Bhutan however couldn’t get parliamentary approval for the connectivity plan, leading to a significant roadblock.

Despite this — and with Bhutan’s diplomatic blessing — the connectivity issue has been taken strongly forward through other forums like SASEC (South Asian Subregional Economic Cooperation) which as Asian Development Bank notes, connectivity projects has a portfolio of about \$10bn in some 49 projects. A Coastal

Shipping Agreement has been signed through another forum. In short, all the objectives that brought SAARC into being are thriving, but through other platforms. To all appearances, SAARC is dead in the water, but the rest of the region on to other ways of cooperation. Many in India feel it is time to ditch SAARC altogether.

Pakistan knows this. For Islamabad, SAARC has so far been an instrument for India bashing and holding everyone else to ransom. This was evident at the last SAARC foreign ministers meeting, when Pakistani foreign minister chose to blame India for lack of progress in the body. That's standard stuff, and was expected. At this point however, Pakistan is conscious of the fact that it is the focus of criticism for much of the world, led by the United States.

There's another issue. Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan has recently been making some overtures towards India. Not being a "made in the mould" politician, he has frankly admitted that increasingly scarce resources have to be turned to development and not confrontation, which needs some semblance of "non war".

In short, there's no money in the bank. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is certainly not about to hand out another tranche of assistance, without making sure it doesn't go into wasteful expenditure like tilting against Indian windmills. This time, it's in Pakistan's interest to make a show of ending hostilities with India. That's the sum of it. And its now in India's decision whether or not to carry on with a forum which only serves to highlight Pakistan's intransigence. Now that's a thought.

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(<https://www.firstpost.com/india/pakistan-to-invite-narendra-modi-for-saarc-summit-next-year-masterstroke-by-imran-khan-puts-india-in-a-pickle-5629311.html>)



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Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan laid the foundation stone of the Kartarpur Corridor in Pakistan on Wednesday. Imran was accompanied by Pakistan Army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa and Indian politicians Navjot Singh Sidhu, Harsimrat Kaur Badal and Hardeep Singh Puri.

Imran laid the foundation stone (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/kartarpur-corridor-live-updates-kartarpur-is-mecca-madina-for-sikhs-says-pakistan-prime-minister-imran-khan-5629921.html>) for the corridor to link the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur in Pakistan's Punjab province — the final resting place of Sikh faith's founder Guru Nanak Dev — to the Dera Baba Nanak shrine in Gurdaspur district in India's state of Punjab.

Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan is located across the river Ravi, about 4 kilometres from the Dera Baba Nanak shrine. It was established by the Sikh Guru in 1522. The first gurdwara, Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib, was built in Kartarpur, where Guru Nanak Dev is believed to have died.

The Kartarpur Corridor, which will facilitate the visa-free travel of Sikh pilgrims from both sides, is expected to be completed in six months.

At the ground-breaking ceremony, Imran addressed a gathering of ministers, diplomats and journalists. He called the Kartarpur Corridor a great victory for unity, adding that it was a historic day for both India and Pakistan. Imran also pledged to improve the facilities at the shrine.



Imran Khan and Navjot Singh Sidhu at Kartarpur.
Image courtesy: @PTIofficial/Twitter

Talking about the rocky India-Pakistan relationship, Imran said: "If France and Germany can live in peace, why can't India and Pakistan?"

He pointed out that Kashmir was the only bone of contention between the neighbours, and that the dispute could be resolved if there was a strong-willed leadership on both sides of the border.

"There is immense potential waiting to be unleashed if our borders are opened and free flow of trade is allowed," Imran said, adding

that Pakistan was ready to take the double initiative to resolve the conflict if India takes a step ahead for peaceful dialogue.

Addressing the pilgrims present at Kartarpur, the Pakistani prime minister said: "The happiness I saw today was like of those Muslims who are standing 4 kilometres away from Mecca Madina on the other side of the border, but are unable to visit it, and when they get chance to visit it, the happiness they get is the happiness you are relishing today."

Towards the end of his speech, Imran talked about the criticism his "friend" Sidhu" received for his previous visit to Pakistan. "I heard there was a lot of criticism of Sidhu when he went back (to India) after my oath-taking ceremony. I don't know why was he criticised. He was just talking about peace and brotherhood."

Imran then went ahead and invited Sidhu to contest elections in Pakistan, saying that he would surely win if he did. He concluded his address saying, "I hope we don't have to wait for Sidhu to become India's prime minister to have an everlasting friendship between our nations."

Sidhu, who attended the ground-breaking ceremony of the Kartarpur Corridor on the Pakistani side amid a controversy in India for accepting the invitation (<https://www.firstpost.com/politics/navjot-singh-sidhu-says-kartarpur-corridor-will-erase-enmity-between-india-and-pakistan-prove-to-be-path-of-peace-5626021.html>), said both the Indian and Pakistani governments should realise that they have to move forward. He said violence must be stopped and peace should be restored between the two countries.

The Punjab minister and Congress leader said there had been enough bad blood between India and Pakistan, and that the corridor would be a major opportunity to open the doors of the hearts of the people.

"Violence must stop and peace should return to the region," he said.

Sidhu added that both nations should seek a path of brotherhood and live in harmony without any fear with the blessings of Guru Nanak Dev. If the borders between both countries opened, Sidhu noted that it would be possible to transport goods to different parts of Pakistan and even others countries.

"This is my hope, this is my dream... While there is blood in my veins, I will continue to thank both governments," he said. "My father used to tell me that Punjab Mail went till Lahore. I believe that it can go further till Peshawar, till Afghanistan."

Sidhu thanked his "big-hearted" friend Imran for keeping his promise and ending the 70-year wait for the Kartarpur Corridor.

"The Kartarpur spirit can make pilgrims of us all, venturing out on a journey that breaks the barriers of history and opens the borders of the heart and the mind. A journey that our people can walk together towards, a future of shared peace and prosperity for India and Pakistan," he said, ahead of the ceremony.

With inputs from PTI

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