

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's invitation to Prime Minister Vajpayee to travel to Lahore by the newly inaugurated bus service and Vajpayee's prompt response accepting the invitation had caught the imagination of people in both countries. The latest observations by the two Prime Ministers suggested a distinct thawing of relations which witnessed excellent prospects for meaningful negotiations. It was possible that the renewal of the Test series after a decade long interval, and the remarkable sporting atmosphere free of any feeling of animosity in which the Chennai match was played, had been responsible for fostering the feeling that a beginning could be made. It has always been known that an enormous fund of goodwill and the desire to have close ties have marked the attitude of the common people of both countries inspite of the three wars. Both have realised that their mutual hostility could not invite increasing pressure from the US and the world community.

Causes behind Pak's invitation

For Nawaz Sharif, compulsions were probably more economic than anything else, apart from pressure from the US to which Pakistan is more vulnerable than India. His change of focus from Kashmir to investment, trade, business, sports and culture and regret over wasting resources or an arms race point to a refreshing reappraisal of his country's stand, which must be eagerly grasped by India. There was undoubtedly a US pressure on the Pakistani establishment to talk to India. The World Bank and IMF adamantly gave prescription after prescription for the sick economy and had also exhorted Pakistan to improve trade with India. It is pertinent to note here that Pakistani premier had toured Washington in the first week of December 1998, to emphasise the special place Islamabad had consistently enjoyed in the US Presidential considerations. Given the kind of difficulties that the Pakistani Prime Minister was facing back home, he could have asked for nothing better than a few tokens that he could flaunt back home to silence his domestic critics. Instead, he came back from Washington almost empty-handed. He could not get sanctions on the conventional military assistance lifted, nor did Washington agree to mediate on the Kashmir issue. Bill Clinton, as a consummate and pragmatic politician, had proved that when it comes to weighing India and Pakistan on the scales of America's geostrategic and economic calculus, India came out way ahead. Despite America's traditional sympathy for Pakistan as a cold war ally and a willing Afghan Mujahideen conduct, Clinton did bend over backwards to avoid any impression of favouring Pakistan over India.

The announcement that Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee would travel to Pakistan on the inaugural Delhi-Lahore bus service, had raised high hopes in New Delhi and Islamabad. A spokesman of the Indian External Affairs Ministry said that the path-breaking exercise will be one more manifestation of India's abiding desire to build peaceful, friendly

and co-operative relations with Pakistan. Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, when informed about the planned visit of Vajpayee welcomed it and said that it would go a long way in establishing good ties with India. Sources on the Indian side maintained that the bus service was geared to work as part of confidence-building measures

Visit interactions

On 20 February 1999, the much-awaited moment came in the history of Indo-Pak relations when Atal Bihari Vajpayee entered the Wagah border after 37 km. journey by bus from the Amritsar airport in Punjab. The Prime Minister went straight to receive the BSF guard of honour and he proceeded to address the press where he read out the prepared message. "I am visiting Pakistan today at the invitation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. When I cross that gate, and throughout my visit, I will draw inspiration from the knowledge that the prayers and goodwill of the people of India are with me. My message to the people of Pakistan will be short and simple. Put aside the bitterness of the past, together, let us make a new beginning". In his arrival statement, Vajpayee described the bus journey as a "defining moment and exhorted Sharif to join him, while speaking at a banquet at Lahore Fort in the evening, in developing "trust, confidence and amity" he noted that his current visit was only the beginning and that "we will together, give direction to our officials to accelerate what we have jointly set in motion. In the context, it is undeniable that despite the bitterly acrimonious history of India-Pakistan relationship, with its roots going back to the pre-British period of the subcontinent's past, every new effort to make a fresh beginning is characterised by great optimism. What it probably denotes is a deep underlying desire among the common people of the two countries to bury the past, perhaps motivated by the memories of having lived together at one time. What Vajpayee had tried, apparently was to convey through the gesture of travelling in a bus was to re-establish the snapped links between the ordinary people of the two countries through regular service. His trip marked a defining moment, as he said because it was expected to be a turning point where the emphasis will change from suspicion and hostility to trust and co-operation.



Former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee with Former Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif

The Theme of Joint Declaration

A joint declaration signed by the two Prime Ministers was issued on 21 February 1999, which resolved to intensify efforts to solve problems. The two leaders held a discussion on the entire range of bilateral relations, regional co-operation within SAARC and issues of international concern. They will meet periodically to discuss all issues of mutual concern, including nuclear-related issues. As per the declaration, they expressed satisfaction on the commencement of a bus service between Lahore and New Delhi, the release of fisherman and civilian detainees and the renewal of contacts in the field of sports. Apart from this, pursuant to the directive given by the two Prime Ministers, the Foreign Secretaries of Pakistan and India signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the same day, identifying measures aimed at promoting an environment of peace and security between the two countries. Vajpayee's visit to Pakistan was hailed by the United States of America and its President Bill Clinton. In an unusual move, he had welcomed the Lahore Summit between Indian Prime Minister and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif and promised all help to the two countries in promoting progress in the region. In a statement in Washington, he noted, "I commend the two Prime Ministers for demonstrating courage and leadership by coming together and addressing difficult issues that have long divided their countries." The

US President seemed satisfied with the Lahore declaration and maintained “South Asia—and indeed, the entire world—will benefit if India and Pakistan promptly turn these commitments into concrete progress adding that we would continue our own efforts to work with India and Pakistan to promote progress in the region. Domestically, the declaration was hailed by BJP and its allies of the government, the efforts made by Vajpayee for taking the initiative and at the same time, praised Pakistan’s Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for responding to Vajpayee’s call to improve Indo-Pak relations.

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