

If the Finns could do it, why can't we?

This is a tale of two frontiers - and of forgiveness and animosity. It's a tale of two countries geographically as far removed as the desert is from the snow; of one nation where pragmatism is the cornerstone and of another where an antagonistic mindset has come in the way of moving forward for the common good of its citizens.

Let us first consider the India-Pakistan frontier crossing at Wagah in the Punjab. Remove the hustle and bustle and mutual backslapping at festival time here, and what remains is the animosity that is a hangover of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 - a standoff that has lingered for 60 long years and shows no sign of abating in the near or distant future.

Now consider the frontier crossing at Suopera on the Finnish-Russian border, equidistant from this capital city as Wagah is from New Delhi.

It's all very businesslike at Suopera. The border guards are there on both sides but there is nothing obliquely visible about their presence - in fact, they blend into the background. Each side keeps to itself - because there is genuine peace between the once-hostile nations and there is little need for outward displays of artificial emotion.

'You hold flag meetings and exchange sweets on festivals?' an incredulous Finnish border guards' officer asked. 'We don't need to do any of this. We never have any incidents here and whatever has to be sorted out can be done between our capitals. We are only here to check your travel papers,' he added.

Be that as it may, it would be pertinent to point out that the Finns would have every reason to be antagonistic toward their much larger eastern neighbour. Not only did Russia rule Finland for almost a century, but under the terms of their peace treaty at the end of World War II, Finland not only ceded 14 percent of its territory, but also relocated 400,000 people from its border areas and paid an unspecified but immense bounty to Moscow in return for being left alone.

To that extent, Finland was as traumatised as India was with partition but an 'enlightened leadership' through the 1940s and 1950s, as one official here explained, ensured that pragmatism prevailed.

'This translated into a realism that if we were to move ahead, we would have to put the past behind us,' the official added, speaking on condition of anonymity considering the high government post she holds.

For the Finns, this was double difficult, considering they had been under Swedish rule for some 200 years before Russia stepped in and actually declared their independence after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution till World War II intervened.

Toward the end of the war, after it forced the German Army to retreat from St. Petersburg, the Soviet Union once again turned its attention to Finland.

'Here we were, with one million soldiers facing some 10 million Soviet soldiers along a 1,000 km frontier. Thus, when the war ended, it was either a question of maintaining a state of hostilities or ensuring there was a state of peace so we could move ahead with our lives,' the Finnish official

explained.

As the logical next step, Helsinki and Moscow signed a bilateral trade agreement with a staggering 30 percent of Finland's exports going to the Soviet Union and earning the much-needed foreign exchange necessary for pushing development.

The collapse of the Soviet Union sent the Finnish economy into a tailspin but such was the resilience it had developed by then that it soon recovered by discovering new markets in the West.

And, since becoming a member of the European Community in 1995 and initiating market reforms about the same time, it's been full speed ahead for the Finnish economy with growth recorded at 5.5 percent last year against an average of three percent in the previous years.

'Hey wait,' you might say, 'India's eight percent growth is far ahead of that - and of Pakistan' - but you are missing the point.

Finland is at peace with its neighbours and spends a negligible amount of its GDP on its armed forces. Against this, unresolved border issues with Pakistan - and China - mean that India allocates a little over three percent of its GDP to its military. In fact, the Indian parliament's Standing Committee on Defence has recommended that the figure be pegged at a minimum of five percent.

It is also true that India, Pakistan and the other six nations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have brought into force the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) but it is anyone's guess when this will become a living reality.

It might sound rather simplistic, but for an Indian who for 54 years has been brought up on stories on why India and Pakistan cannot live in peace - and who has reported on this for upwards of 30 years - a visit to Suopera was an eye-opener.

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