

SANSAD

South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy

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Joint IndoPak Peace & Goodwill Mission Celebrated by South Asians and their friends in Vancouver

South Asians living in the Vancouver area gathered at Collingwood Neighborhood House on February 26, 2005 to celebrate the completion of the first Joint India-Pakistan Peace and Goodwill Mission. Captain Suleman Mahtab of Vancouver, and Drs. Pritam Rohila and Kundan Rohila of Portland, Oregon, who were members of this historic mission gave a report on it to fifty writers and activists of the South Asian community. The meeting was organized by South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy (SANSAD) and co-sponsored by Canada Urdu Association, Hindi Literary Society, Pakistan Canada Association, Punjabi Writer's forum and Canpak Alliance of Victoria.

The delegates, who recently returned from a 2-week trip to India and Pakistan to promote peace, reported their meetings with high government officials, political and religious leaders, lawyers, journalists, businessmen, peace activists, academics and representatives of labor and women's groups in both countries. Their objective was to demonstrate that Indians and Pakistanis could work together for peace, in spite of the differences in their professional training, religious affiliations, cultural background, national origin, political points of view, and personal experiences.

Captain Mahtab thanked all the local media, especially the Miracle, Asian Star, Voice, India Abroad, and Al-Ameen, and all other organizations and individuals who had supported the peace efforts.

Captain Mahtab explained the challenges faced by the delegation in the context of the historical enmity between India and Pakistan. The main objective of the goodwill mission, he said, was "to help catalyse the level of people-to-people contact between the citizens of India and Pakistan regardless of the current state of bilateral relations between their governments". He reported that he witnessed a desire for peace in both countries and was encouraged by people's determination to not leave the promotion of peace entirely in the hands of the governments.

Dr. Pritam Rohila, who had witnessed the horrors of the partition of the subcontinent said that the delegation of Indians and Pakistanis living in the West carried the message that different backgrounds and opinions had not prevented South Asians abroad from living as good neighbours and having cordial relations in our communities. Such co-operation could also be achieved between Indians and Pakistanis living on the subcontinent and would yield development and economic prosperity in South Asia.

Drs. Pritam Rohila and Kundan Rohila reported that their organisation, the Association for Communal Harmony, proposed the creation of a joint Indo-Pak memorial on the Wagah border to honour the innocent Hindu, Muslim and Sikh victims of the 1947 partition and mark the beginning of a new chapter of better relations between the people. An Internet petition in support of this proposal has been signed by people from over 20 countries and handed over to the top officials of Pakistan and India.

The three delegates informed the meeting that they had lobbied for the following issues:

... Divided families should be able to meet across the border; the visa process should be liberalized; the elderly and disabled should be assisted at the Wagah border.

... Indian fishermen who have been imprisoned in Pakistan should be released.

... There should be an increase in travel facilities, including re-starting the ferry between Mumbai and Karachi.

... Trade should increase between the two countries.

... There should be a focus on improving the economic and living conditions of the people.

... There should be justice for human rights violations.

... There should be a focus on the needs of the Kashmiri people.

... Communal and hate propoganda should be removed from school textbook and films.

... The needs of refugees should be addressed.

... Both countries should sign a 'no-war' treaty.

Following a lively discussion, Mohammad Rafiq (president of the Canada Urdu Association) presided over a session of poetry reading. Hardev Ashk, Shams Jilani, Avtar Rehency, Ajmer Rode, Mohammad Rafiq, Captain Suleman Mahtab, Naseer Pirzada, Col. Shafat Ali, Gulcharan Rampuri and H.E. Zile Singh (Deputy Consul of India) read their poems on the theme of peace, friendship and justice. In honour and appreciation to the peace efforts, senior poet & writer Gulcharan Rampuri, on behalf of all the attending writers and poets, presented his books to the delegates as a 'Prize' for their dedicated peace efforts.

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