



# ATTARI WAGAH CEREMONY

## STOP HATE FOSTER PEACE



Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia,  
PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)  
Director CENJOWS,  
Former DGMO

*Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister Imran Khan's overtures of desiring peace with India open prospects of resumption of talks and setting right the several infirmities that plague relations between the two nuclear armed nations. Some post-Independence 'traditions', the daily flag lowering ceremony at Wagah for instance, that fan a strong patriotic fervour however also infuse antipathy and hatred towards into public psyche.*

*Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, former DGMO analyses the impact of the Wagah Ceremony and emphasises the need to leverage the event to promote a spirit of friendship rather than of hate.*

Since his taking over responsibilities as Pakistan's new Prime Minister, Mr Imran Khan has been talking peace with India, duly backed by the Army Chief General Bajwa. The indicators are a welcome change since the peace talks have been a strict No-No post the Pathankot terrorist attack. There is no denying the fact that peace between the two nuclear armed neighbours will contribute to progress and prosperity, the moot question remains that the new dispensation and General Bajwa in particular need to walk the talk and stop backing and perpetuating terrorism as a state policy to create a conducive environment for any meaningful peace initiatives.



## THE CEREMONY IS LESS ABOUT BEATING THE RETREAT AND MORE ABOUT BEATING THE OTHER SIDE

PM Modi has invested a considerable political capital in trying to initiate peace but all efforts have been thwarted as these initiatives have been immediately proceeded by high visibility terror attacks, Gurdaspur after Ufa in July 2015 followed by Pathankot post Modi's surprise and bold visit to Lahore on 24 Dec 2015. While the two nations await the resumption of a peace dialogue it may be prudent to look at implementable small steps with high impact which can bridge the divide between the two people and eventually contribute to the peace process.

One such step is to revamp and reorient the aggressive and non military 'Beating the retreat ceremony' at the Attari - Wagah border and put an end to the hate it generates and instead foster peace among people.

On the occasion of Independence day on 15 August this year a number of TV channels telecast beating the retreat ceremony at the Wagah border showcasing and applauding the aggression and one-upmanship between the two border guarding forces. It goes without saying that the telecast attracted the eyeballs and succeeded in instilling a sense of pride in the people of India and at the same time an enmity towards Pakistan. It is almost certain that something similar would have taken place a day earlier in Pakistan. Beating the retreat ceremony at Attari-Wagah border between India and Pakistan is by far the most unlike military drill. The ceremony in fact is less about beating the retreat and more about beating the other side. On one side of the zero line India's Border Security Force (BSF) men supported by over 15 to 20,000 people shout 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai' and 'Pakistan

Muradabad' and across the Zero Line the Rangers of Pakistan again supported by hordes of Pakistanis shout 'Pakistan Zindabad' and 'Hindustan Muradabad' in equal measure.

This absurd show of strength, aggressiveness and one up man-ship only adds to animosity and divide between two people and nations created by the British to further their long term interests in pursuance of the age old 'Divide and Rule' Policy. The hard-fought independence was marred by partition which witnessed the largest migration in the history of mankind. The massacre and migration led to the needless death of a few million, uprooting large populations from their roots on either side of the Radcliffe line.

The wounds of partition needed to be healed but unfortunately the wound has festered leading to four wars between the two nuclear armed nations and a quasi permanent divide and an apparent hate relationship between the people of the two countries who share a rich heritage, culture and other ethnic similarities.

This divide is further fueled on a daily dose of an aggressive so called military ceremony "carefully choreographed contempt, where the soldiers mirror each other's goose-steps, thumb-thumps, martial cries and intimidating stares" as described in a 2007 BBC movie by Michael Palin. The format and conduct of the present ceremony at Wagah only contributes to the growing divide leading to competition and conflict.

Seven decades of needless hatred and



***While the two nations await the resumption of a peace dialogue it may be prudent to look at implementable small steps with high impact which can bridge the divide between the two people and eventually contribute to the peace process. One such step is to revamp and reorient the aggressive and non military 'Beating the retreat ceremony' at the Attari Wagah border and put an end to the hate it generates and instead foster peace among people***



**Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia and Maj Gen Amir Riaz**  
DGMOs India and Pakistan  
at Wagah border





“  
*This absurd show of strength, aggressiveness and one up man-ship only adds to animosity and divide between two people and nations*  
”

violence has only succeeded in hampering the development and wellbeing of the people on both sides. India and Pakistan need peace to progress and prosper. This elusive peace cannot be achieved by political means alone; the people also need to work towards it as they are an integral and essential part of the peace process.

Wagah - Attari border crossing was the only road link between India and Pakistan connecting Amritsar and Lahore prior to the Uri - Chakoti road opening in J&K in 1999. Beating the retreat ceremony at this border crossing started in 1959 as a gesture of good neighbourly relations to foster friendship but driven by a warped sense of competition soon turned into an aggressive drill playing to the gallery and encouraging pseudo patriotism on both sides. The ceremony which takes place before sunset every evening is as per military tradition the world over.

The ceremony starts with a blustering parade by the soldiers from both sides, and ends up in perfectly coordinated lowering of the two nations' flags. The spectacle of the ceremony attracts thousands of visitors from both sides of the border, as also some international tourists.

In October 2010 the Indian BSF and Pakistan Rangers decided that the aggressive aspect of the ceremonial theatrics should be toned down. "We have decided to end the angry eyeball-to-eyeball exchange, thumping of boots and other aggressive gestures from the flag-lowering parade," said Maj Gen Khan of the Pakistan rangers. Sushant Singh, a military affairs expert and associate editor of the Indian Express, has called the display "outrageous" and argued for it to be canceled on the grounds that it promotes anti-Pakistan sentiment in India.

However, on ground unfortunately the ceremony has only become more aggressive backed by pseudo nationalist.

The number of people visiting the border to witness the ceremony has seen an exponential growth forcing the Indian side to reconstruct the stadium at a cost of 24 crores to accommodate over 20,000 people. The commercial interests on either side too encourage the aggressiveness and hate to capitalise on the warped patriotic sentiments of the people.

Despite the divide one thing that stands out is the similarities between the two people and their nationalism. Both India and Pakistan will do well to restructure and reorient the ceremony to stop the hate and divide it generates in the present form. A better way is to replace the existing ceremony with cultural programmes, musical evenings and even food festivals showcasing the rich heritage and culture on both sides. This will lead to mutual respect and understanding between the people contributing to long term peace.

The people of Pakistan are known for their love and interest in Bollywood movies, songs and dance and similarly Indians do crave for ethnic Lahori cuisine and Pakistani music which is very popular. Prior to the relations hitting rock bottom a TV channel Zindagi telecasting Pakistan serials was very popular specially among the middle-class women. There is considerable interest among the people for cultural exchanges which can be exploited to generate a peace movement among the people. The ceremony at Attari- Wagah border can provide an excellent and effective platform. The authorities on both sides need to work together to inject some sanity and semblance of respect for each other rather than generate hate and pseudo patriotism.

Though a small step, this will have a major impact in ushering an era of peace and respect for each other in the long run. SA