

PMs NS & MODI MEET SECRETLY:

Inam R Sehri

Reference to book a titled '**Unquiet Land — Stories from India's Fault Lines**' from a veteran journalist Barkha Dutt, printed in India: All that the people saw in 2014 was a quick handshake but away from TV cameras Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif held an hour-long secret meeting on the sidelines of the Saarc summit in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Even though they shared the stage of the Saarc summit in a formal way; there was no exchange of courtesies between Modi and Sharif at the summit – not beyond a handshake. Modi and Sharif, who were sitting two seats away from each other, did not look at each other. Leaders of Maldives and Nepal were seated between them.

Analysts then held that little could be achieved while India's bitter rivalry with Pakistan persisted, even both states wanted to boost mutual trade.

In ending 2014; before the region's first summit in three years, there were the worst cross-border violence in the disputed region of Kashmir in a decade; NATO & US troops were pulling out of Afghanistan – thus intensifying the Pak-India rivalry for influence there.

Meanwhile, another setback, Pakistan had stalled the inking of **Saarc connectivity agreements**, including motor vehicle pact, saying it was yet to complete its "**internal process**". Pakistan's nod brought disappointment for the Indians, who had initiated those proposals.

Amidst such feelings even, the two leaders met. Both the leaders shared their constraints while agreeing they needed more time and greater political space to move forward with public engagements. The meeting was facilitated by Indian steel magnate Sajjan Jindal.

Going a little earlier in 2014; it was known to the whole world that India-Pakistan ties had shown signs of improvement following Modi's ascent to power -- with PM Sharif attending the Indian Prime Minister's swearing-in ceremony in May that year. But, then India suspended foreign secretary-level talks after the Pakistan envoy met Kashmiri separatists.

During their first meeting when PM Sharif came to Delhi for Modi's swearing-in — the two PMs decided to keep reins of the relationship in their hands. It was also agreed that it could be useful to talk informally through a mutual contact they both felt comfortable with.

Unknown to the media and certainly the public, both Modi and Sharif had found someone to "**keep them connected even when things got difficult**"- Sajjan Jindal being an informal and covert messenger between the two leaders.

About the Modi-NS secret meeting, Barkha Dutt wrote that: "*The proximity was at play in Kathmandu, where the Saarc summit was held on November 26 and 27 [of 2014]. Modi called up Jindal from Nepal and asked him to take the earliest flight to the Nepali capital. Jindal was asked to discreetly reach out to his 'friend' across the border. The two leaders then met quietly in the privacy of Jindal's hotel room, where they spent an hour together.*"

Though the **Hindustan Times** [HT] dated **26th November 2014**; had held that India had no plans for a meeting between PM Narendra Modi and Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, amid speculation over whether the two would hold talks on the sidelines of the 18th Saarc summit in Nepal, as Pakistan had not sent a formal request.

But the secret & informal meeting was there. Indian PM Modi wanted Nawaz Sharif's helping hand in the then upcoming Jammu and Kashmir elections. Sharif indicated while he was keen, the "**circumstances**" did not permit him to reopen formal channels. Sharif also spoke about "**constrictions**" imposed on him by the security establishment and how his "**negotiating power with the army had been gradually whittled away**".

"This under-the radar encounter paved the way for Modi to openly reach out to Sharif two months later through a phone call that was positioned as an innocuous good-luck call for the World Cup," Dutt writes more. Her account reinforced a well-known fact – 'domestic politics often determines the course of the fragile bilateral relationship'.

Sajjan Jindal, brother of former Congress MP Naveen Jindal, in May 2014, had hosted a tea party for PM Sharif after his meeting with PM Modi in Delhi. When media persons went to meet the Pakistani PM at Taj Mansingh Hotel Delhi, they saw Mr Jindal escorting Nawaz Sharif's son Hussain for lunch.

Well-known TV journalist Barkha Dutt, further writes that: *"It was no secret that Indian steelmakers, both state and private players, were looking to foster friendly relations with Pakistan; they needed this to happen so they could ferry iron ore from Afghanistan by road across Pakistan from where it could be shipped to ports in western and southern India.*

.....But, Jindal's ties with Sharif appeared to have gone beyond that of a businessman with the head of a government – and the two had become confidantes".

Barkha Dutt's own assessment of Jindal's role is that it did not involve negotiating "*tricky matters of geo-politics. He was more like a covert bridge that connected them if either wanted to reach out to the other side sans protocol or publicity.*" And, because Jindal's role was off the record, it came with plausible deniability.

India had stressed in the past that it was open to dialogue with Pakistan only if the neighbour country took the first step; PM Sharif once told the media that "*ball is now India's court*". India maintained that it was for "*meaningful dialogue*" which involved specifics. *We have been shouting from the top of the roof that we are ready for meaningful dialogue. The meaningful dialogue has a meaning in diplomacy,* "India had reiterated.

Referring to the media news **dated 30th November 2015; 'We'll go for peace with India but without any compromise on our country's dignity'**, Pakistan's premier Nawaz Sharif told media after his brief meeting with Indian PM Modi on the sidelines of a climate change summit in Paris on 30th November 2015.

That Paris meeting was the first between the two leaders after July 2015 when they met in the Russia's Ufa and agreed that their National Security Advisers [NSA] would hold talks. The meeting, however, did not take place after the Pakistan High Commission in India insisted on inviting Kashmiri leaders for a reception in honour of Pakistan's NSA, Sartaj Aziz.

After meeting PM Modi, PM Sharif talked very short to the media confining to say that his country attached highest significance to its principled stance of keeping bilateral relations with India. However, a day earlier **on 29th November 2015**, on the sidelines of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Valletta, Malta, PM Sharif told British PM David Cameron during a bilateral meeting that Islamabad would be ready for talks with New Delhi – the news went silent that on what agenda.

Referring to the '**Dawn**' **dated 3rd December 2015;** Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan lashed out at PM Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart PM Modi for hold-

ing a secret meeting in Kathmandu in ending 2014 and called both leaders '**cowards**'. Mr Khan held that: "*Leaders do not need to hold meetings in secret. They do not need to lie; in fact they must be credible.*"

But both the Pakistan and Indian governments via official statements rubbished reports of such a meeting, terming news reports on the matter "**baseless**."

Let us hope better in the interest of the poor populace suffering on both sides of this region.

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