Keeping faith: On People-to-People Initiatives and India-Pakistan Ties

Why in news?

A proposal has been made by the Pakistan Hindu Council, forwarded by Pakistan to India, to allow pilgrims of both countries to travel by air to avoid cumbersome journeys.

What is the current status of Islamabad-Delhi ties?

- Islamabad-Delhi ties now are possibly at their worst ever in peace times, with no political dialogue at a bilateral or multilateral level for over 5 years.
- India has stopped normal communications and cultural exchanges after many terror attacks
- Pakistan has stopped all trade ties after the Government's moves on Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir.
- Both sides have downsized their diplomatic missions.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has ensured that the borders have been virtually sealed for 2 years, with few direct routes operating between them.
- An Indian request to send 500,000 MT of wheat as humanitarian aid to Afghanistan via Wagah border has been awaiting Pakistani clearances for several months.
- The few India-Pakistan confidence-building measures (CBMs) that continue to exist are
    - The opening of the Kartarpur corridor for Sikh pilgrims in 2019
    - Exchanging lists of prisoners held by both sides of each other's citizens

The Kartarpur corridor is a visa-free corridor connecting Dera Baba Nanak village in Gurdaspur, Punjab to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, Kartarpur.

How are religious exchanges governed?

- Religious exchanges, of mainly Muslim pilgrims from Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs from India, are governed by a protocol signed in **1974**.
- As per the agreement, hundreds of Indian and Pakistani pilgrims crossover at the **Wagah/Atari border** to travel to the shrines facing more circuitous routes.
- It also causes extra time in travel.
- So, the Pakistan Hindu Council has now signed an MoU with Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) to facilitate faith-based tour groups.
- The Council has asked that PIA charters from Karachi and Lahore be allowed to fly direct to Indian cities with a view to allow reciprocal air charters from India.

What is the significance of this proposal?

- If clearances are received, this would be the first PIA flight to travel to India since operations were suspended in 2019, and the first ever such flight carrying pilgrims from either side since

1947.

- The erstwhile Indian Airlines last flew to Pakistan in March 2008.
- This would boost the pilgrimage tourism to travel to the Hinglaj Mata Mandir in Balochistan, the Paramhans Mandir in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Ajmer Sharif dargah in Rajasthan, the Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi and other such shrines.
- A start with faith tourism can go on towards more tourism, and then trade and regular travel.
- The people-to-people initiatives can help build a little bit of goodwill.

References

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