
The man who tried to make India-Pak border irrelevant

By G Parthasarathy

Diplomacy is a profession where many serving their country achieve remarkable successes, but receive scant public attention, or recognition. In the demise of **Satinder Lambah** (popularly called “Sati”), India lost an outstanding diplomat who had often done his country proud in very difficult situations.

There was much he achieved in challenging times in capitals like Moscow, Bonn and Islamabad. He was a thorough professional and avoided personal publicity. He was outstanding in his dealings with the media, both in India and abroad, while avoiding receiving credit for his personal role. It was not surprising that there

was a strong presence of friends from the media during his last rites on Friday.

Born in Peshawar in 1941, Lambah graduated from Delhi and joined the foreign service. His career included two postings each in Pakistan and Moscow. Our paths crossed during Lambah’s first tenure, where relations with Pakistan were pretty thin in the days of General Zia-ul Haq. But despite the heavy surveillance of the ISI, Lambah had a vast circle of friends and contacts in Islamabad and in provincial cities like Lahore, including notably, a young emerging politician, Nawaz Sharif!

He negotiated the first major agreement with Pakistan that led to the establishment of a joint commission, for

promoting economic, people-to-people and cultural cooperation. His second term as high commissioner to Pakistan involved hard negotiations on Islamabad’s support for terrorism in J&K. It was on his return to Moscow in 1995 that Lambah played a sterling role in negotiating agreements between ONGC and the petrochemical sector in Russia on oil and gas. This set the stage for growing cooperation in

oil and gas sectors, which is yielding great returns in the current tough times.

Immediately after his retirement, Lambah’s expertise on Pakistan and Afghanistan were requisitioned by then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. When the Taliban were ousted from Afghanis-

tan in 2001, Lambah led the Indian delegation to an international conference in Bonn, presided over by US secretary of state Colin Powell. Participants included all major powers and neighbours, including Pakistan, and Afghanistan’s influential organisations and leaders like Hamid Karzai. Lambah played a cru-

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cial role in the success of the conference, drawing praise from the American delegation. The US delegate ambassador James Dobbins praised his role, noting that most delegates had no respect for the role of Pakistan during the Taliban rule. He, however, pointedly noted: “When the

Pakistani delegate to the conference arrived, later than the rest, Lambah was one of the few people to show him any kindness.”

Perhaps the most notable achievement of Lambah’s long service was his involvement in secret “back channel” talks on Jammu & Kashmir with a personal envoy of General Pervez Musharraf. The Indian position had been made clear by PM Manmohan Singh when he stated on March 24, 2006: “Borders cannot be redrawn, but we can work towards making them irrelevant, towards making them ‘just lines on a map’. People on both sides of the Line of Control should be able to move more freely and trade with one another.”

Few aspects of the “back channel” negotiations be-

tween Lambah and his Pakistani counterpart were published in the New Yorker magazine of March 2, 2009. This was evidently based on briefings by President Musharraf’s then foreign minister Khurshid Kasuri. The New Yorker quoted Kasuri as recalling that by early 2007, the back-channel talks on Kashmir had become “so advanced that we’d come to semicolons”. A senior Indian official who was involved agreed. “It was huge. I think it would have changed the basic nature of the problem,” he told me. “You would have then had the freedom to remake Indo-Pakistan relations.” Lambah was also involved in negotiating the details of a visit to Pakistan by the Indian Prime Minister during which, they hoped, the principles underlying the

Kashmir agreement would be announced and talks aimed at implementation inaugurated. The visit never took place.

There has been a veil of secrecy over what more transpired in these “back channel” talks. The papers on the negotiations are said to have been handed over formally to the Narendra Modi government. It is yet another tribute to my old friend and colleague Satinder Lambah that everything that transpired in his talks with his Pakistani counterpart was put on record by him. We pray that his soul may rest in eternal peace.

The author is former Indian high commissioner to Australia and Pakistan. He has also served at Indian missions in Moscow and Washington DC, among others.