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Q20

Terrorist activities and mutual distrust have clouded India - Pakistan relations. To what extent the use of soft power like sports and cultural exchange could help generate goodwill between the two countries. Discuss with suitable examples.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · GS II · 12 marks · Governance and Policy

Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

Core demand of the question

- Terrorist activities and mutual distrust have clouded India - Pakistan relations. To what extent the use of soft power like sports and cultural exchange could help generate goodwill between the two countries. Discuss with suitable examples

Revision summary

Terrorism and wars have made distrust the default in India-Pakistan ties.

Cricket, films, music, pilgrimage and campaigns such as **Aman ki Asha** can humanise the other side.

Goodwill from sport and culture is real, shallow, and reversed by the next major attack.

Soft power is a floor for people-to-people contact, not a substitute for ending cross-border terrorism.

Multilateral cricket and humanitarian visas are the most durable practical tools.

Introduction

India-Pakistan relations have been shaped by Partition, wars, Kashmir, and repeated terrorist attacks on Indian soil, from the 2001 Parliament attack to **26/11 Mumbai**. Official talks freeze when blood is shed; publics learn to expect the freeze. Soft power - cricket, films, music, pilgrimage, literature - still moves ordinary people when the border is shut. It can generate pockets of goodwill. It cannot, by itself, replace a credible end to cross-border terrorism or a political process. The extent of help is real, limited, and easily reversed.

Body

Why distrust is the baseline

- Terrorism with alleged sanctuary or support from Pakistani soil is, for India, not a composite dialogue item but a first condition. Each attack resets the political clock.
- Military crises, ceasefire violations, and media nationalism on both sides punish leaders who look "soft".
- **People-to-people contact is already thin:** visas, the Attari-Wagah theatre, and suspended bus and train links after shocks.

- Soft power that ignores this structure will be called naive in Delhi and insufficient in the families of victims.

How sports and culture can still help - with examples

- **Cricket:** India-Pakistan matches at World Cups and Champions Trophies draw huge shared audiences. The 2004 Indian tour of Pakistan, in a thaw after the 2003 ceasefire, showed stadiums as temporary public diplomacy. Players' visits and commentary humanise the other side in a way a joint statement does not.
- Hockey, kabaddi and tennis have smaller but similar effects when series are allowed.
- **Cinema and television:** Hindi films and Pakistani television dramas have crossed the border in both directions in calmer years. Artists (khayal, qawwali, Sufi circuits) share a civilisational grammar that Partition did not fully cut.
- **Aman ki Asha** (Times of India and Jang group, 2010) was a media-led cultural and dialogue campaign that kept a civilian channel when official talks were brittle.
- **Pilgrimage:** the **Kartarpur corridor** idea (later opened in 2019) and older visas for the Nankana Sahib and Ajmer Sharif circuits show religion as a people-to-people route, not only as a conflict fuel.
- Track-two dialogues, writers' festivals, and alumni of shared universities create elites who can argue for restraint in a crisis - a thin but useful layer.
- Shared disaster response or sports ceasefires (playing on after a tragedy, or using a tournament as cover to resume talks) have occasionally lowered the temperature.

Extent and limits

- Soft power works best as a supplement when violence is down and visas exist. It does not survive a Mumbai-scale attack; films get banned, series get cancelled, and cricketers become symbols, not ambassadors.
- State-controlled narratives can turn a match into a nationalist test. Then sport increases distrust rather than goodwill.
- Goodwill among fans is not policy. The Pakistan Army-civilian balance and non-State groups are not moved by a cover drive.
- **Asymmetry:** Indian entertainment has a larger market. Cultural flow can feel like one-way influence in Pakistan, which creates its own resentment.
- **Useful extent:** keep human contact alive, reduce caricature, give both governments a face-saving off-ramp after a pause, and protect pilgrims and students from becoming hostages of every incident.
- Not useful as a substitute for intelligence cooperation, FATF-type pressure, or a clear Indian red line on terrorism.

A realistic mix

- Continue cricket in multilateral events even when bilateral series are politically impossible.
- Keep pilgrimage and medical visas as humanitarian exceptions.
- Do not pretend a concert equals a composite dialogue. Do not, either, empty the relationship of every civilian tie; that only feeds the next generation of distrust.

Flow diagram

Terrorism and distrust -> Official freeze
Sports cinema pilgrimage -> Pockets of goodwill
Pockets of goodwill -> Easier thaw when violence pauses
Terrorism and distrust -> Bans cancelled series
Bans cancelled series -> Official freeze
Policy on terror -> Soft power cannot replace

Conclusion

Sports and cultural exchange can generate real but perishable goodwill between Indians and Pakistanis, as cricket tours, films, Sufi and Punjabi culture, media campaigns such as **Aman ki Asha**, and pilgrimage show. The extent of help is limited: terrorism and the security establishments reset the relationship faster than a stadium can rebuild it. Soft power is worth keeping as a people-to-people floor. It is not a foreign-policy ceiling until violence stops being the opening move.

Facts & figures

26/11 Mumbai (2008)

The attack froze composite dialogue and remains the benchmark of why New Delhi treats terrorism as the gate, not a side issue.

2004 cricket tour of Pakistan

A high-visibility people-to-people moment during a thaw after the 2003 ceasefire, often cited as sports diplomacy.

Aman ki Asha (2010)

A joint media initiative of the Times of India and Pakistan's Jang group to promote dialogue and cultural contact.

Pilgrimage circuits

Sikh shrines in Pakistan and Sufi shrines in India have been among the few regular civilian crossings when politics allow visas.

Kartarpur corridor (2019)

A later visa-free access to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, showing how faith travel can outlast a freeze in talks - still within a hard security frame.