



JAIN GROUP SEEKS GOVT. NOD TO TRAVEL TO PAKISTAN



As India–Pakistan tensions and the land border closure post– COVID hold up all religious pilgrimages between the two countries, a group of 22 members of the Jain faith have appealed to the Ministry of Home Affairs to allow them to go to Pakistan to visit a shrine that has been restored after decades. The group, led by Jalandhar-based activist Sunil Jain, who heads the World Jain-Muslim Interfaith Harmony Council, received visas to travel to Lahore and now they receive clearances from the MHA and the Immigration Department to travel via the Atari-Wagah border in Punjab. Among the shrines they hope to see is a temple in Gujranwala, which was only recently being used as the local Deputy Superintendent of Police’s office, and another shrine in Lahore that was attacked and seriously damaged in riots that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992. Both shrines are among a number of temples being restored by the Imran Khan government after the Pakistan Supreme Court ordered that they be reconstructed and handed over to the minorities welfare board. The group also received a special visa for a ‘Maharaj’ or special cook who is able to prepare food according to the strict Jain customs which prohibit onions, garlic, root vegetables and other items, Mr. Jain said. Members include Jains from Delhi, Mumbai, Maharashtra, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Both the MEA. and the MHA have declined to comment on the case.

Religious pilgrimages between India and Pakistan, mandated under a 1974 protocol, have been reduced in the past few years due to tensions and the closure of the land border due to Covid-19 regulations. Despite India opening up travel and flights with many countries, the land borders with Pakistan haven't yet been reopened, although as a special gesture, India and Pakistan have allowed truck convoys carrying wheat as humanitarian aid for Afghanistan recently.

A proposal forwarded by the Pakistan government to New Delhi to allow Hindu, Sikh and Muslim pilgrims from both sides to take flights has also run into red tape, after the Ministry of External Affairs said the permission could only follow once India and Pakistan open talks to renegotiate the 1974 protocol. The Imran Khan government has refused to hold talks with India and suspended trade ties after the Modi government's decision to change the status of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019. In such circumstances, the only option open for the Jain group is to fly to Pakistan via a third country like the UAE or Qatar, which is prohibitively expensive. No Jains live in Pakistan today, as most of this small community moved to India during Partition, and those that remained are believed to have emigrated to other countries or converted locally given the pressures they faced from the majority Islamic population, and Jain shrines are hardly ever visited. The Gujranwala Jain temple of "Acharya Atmaramji", for example, lay in disuse from 1947 to 1984, when it was commandeered by the local police authorities for their offices. The temple was built around a 'samadhi' to consecrate the ashes of one of the Jain faith's most renowned Gurus VijayanandSuri, who died in 1895. Acharya Atmaram was among those invited to the "World Religions Parliament" conference held in Chicago in 1893, where Swami Vivekananda had famously represented India and Hinduism. In December, the Pakistan Supreme Court ordered the immediate restoration of the Jain temple and NeelaGumbad (Blue Dome) in Lahore, which had been razed by a mob two days after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and was in ruins until now, and is set to reopen after being rebuilt in the next few months.

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