

## LETTERS FROM THE OLD STREET

One mellow October afternoon last year I reached the Wagah border, like many others, to see the military parade on this side of the international border, mixing a sense of grandeur and heroism. The buildup was electrifying. Hit Hindi-movie numbers extolling the virtues of sacrifice and love for the motherland blared from the high-decibel sound system. From my seat – quite close to the gate that stands as barrier between India and Pakistan – I looked around taking in the atmosphere. It was a mix of Bollywood and one-day cricket, tension in the air. The most pulsating song was sung with deep intensity by AR Rahman – *Ma tujhe salaam...* India, we learnt in our younger days, is a Nehruvian project. The air was so surcharged many were dancing, holding the little Tricolours, to the tune of the songs. The members of a large family were among them. A tall hefty white man, apparently from somewhere in North America, was swinging, his mixed-race child in his arms. His Indian wife, her sister, other children – they all were swaying and clapping. The redoubtable elderly woman in salwar kameez, sitting next to me, kept time and clicked her fingers to wahwah her grandchildren.

The smartly turned-out Border Security Force jawans – both men and women holding automatic weapons – marched with mock aggression – towards the gate. On the other side of the gate, everyone knew, was *enemy country*. I tried to look beyond the gate for a glimpse of Pakistan. They too were playing songs, their rangers in sharp-fitted uniform, getting ready for the show. I looked back at this side; far above everything – jubilation, high-voltage music, the sitting galleries – was Gandhi, looking incongruous among martial exuberance and simulated aggression. I felt a tap on my shoulder – the woman heading her patriotic clan. “Who’s that?” She pointed to the picture on the other side – Gandhi’s counterpoint.

“Jinnah.”

“Ah. Nice man – to begin with? I’ve heard.”

“Until...”

She threw a baseball cap to a grandchild who was jumping, unable to get into the act of Bollywood breakdance. She turned to me again. “Until what?”

“Until the last few years before Independence.”

She looked forward, admiring the women in khaki, the sleek guns in their hands, moving resolutely towards the invisible enemy. She had lost interest in history.

I too concentrated on the final act of the daily parade: the gate opened and a BSF jawan and a Pakistani ranger met ceremonially for the lowering of the two national flags. The sunset ritual. The BSF women who had taken part in the parade were the new heroes, young girls mobbing them to a corner for selfies. But the years kept buzzing inside my head. 1937 could have redrawn the future roadmap of India – still undivided, without the scars of Partition, without the brutalizing process of dislocation and death. Early that year the Indian National Congress had swept the provincial elections capturing power in 8 out of the 11 provinces; the Muslim League – none. That was the moment the nationalist

leadership – Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Azad – should have given Jinnah some space, bringing him back into the fold. After all, he was the same young, Westernised lawyer mentored by Gopal Krishna Gokhale who called him the ‘the best ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity’. It was at Gokhale’s behest that Jinnah defended Bal Gangadhar Tilak being tried by the British in a sedition case. And he was the same ‘tall and stately’ person the nationalist poet Sarojini Naidu wrote so lavishly about.

In the provincial elections the Muslim League managed to win 106 seats as against Congress’ 707. After the drubbing Jinnah felt the path of moderation and constitutionality would not take him anywhere. In October that year he attended the League session in Lucknow. For him that was an opportunity to retrieve the lost ground, recover his political base. In his presidential address to the gathering, Jinnah asked Muslims to ‘take their destiny in their own hands’.

Once started, the slide could not be stopped. A few years later he gave a call for *direct action* and more than 4000 people died in a single day of rioting in Calcutta.

For me Pakistan first came through the cricketing icons – Intikhab Alam, Asif Iqbal, Zaheer Abbas, Imran Khan, Wasim Akram... A long list indeed. I remember a Test match at the Eden Gardens one January morning in 1980, suddenly coming alive with Asif’s decision as captain to declare the Pakistan first innings at 272 for 4, still 59 runs behind India’s 331. From the stand I saw a captain’s gutsy gambling and a bold move. That was his last outing as Pakistan skipper. Raised in Hyderabad, he had played for South Zone against a visiting Pakistan side before migrating to the other side. There was a certain panache about his cricket.

Then came the great ghazal singers – Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Mehdi Hassan, Ghulam Ali... When you listen to them, a commonality, both cultural and spiritual, subsumes the divide and raw hostility which has often flared into gunfire over the past 70 years or so. The sharpest indictment of Partition came from the writer Saadat Hasan Manto. For a man whose life revolved around the film studios of Bombay where he had worked, the border dividing what was essentially one whole country and the same people, was a terrible joke. The madman of *Toba Tek Singh* or the dog sauntering from the Indian border post to the one held by the Pakistani soldiers (‘The Dog of Tithwal’) – they through their sufferings mock at the absurdity of a line drawn by an Englishman in a hurry.

When you meet them in Europe or North America, invariably it’s the Pakistani expat who steps forward to greet you first, shake hands and break into Urdu. Travelling somewhere in the Midwest of the US – was it Des Moines? – one evening many years ago our group decided to try out the city’s Indian fare. The place we settled for was a throwback to the Pandara Park restaurants in Delhi. The owner greeted us in chaste Urdu. Asked about his roots, he smiled enigmatically: *Main kuchh idhar ka kuchh udhar ka*. His family had migrated from Agra to Lahore during Partition. He chatted us up with his knowledge of Old Delhi. After the main course came mango pudding – something we had not ordered. We looked at the owner. “It’s complimentary for my Indian friends.” He laughed.

Late one night in 2013 I was looking at the submissions in the Palimpsest inbox hoping for something exciting. In one corner lay very inconspicuously a letter with an attached text, the author a student at SOAS, University of London. I read the first few chapters and wrote back asking for the whole book. *If the rest of the book is as good as what I read, perhaps I will take it on.* I kept my thought to myself and waited. A few days later the entire manuscript landed and I went on reading and rereading it. Three generations of a family in Karachi have made mistakes and suffered – without knowing their trajectory has run parallel to that of their country. We published Taha Kehar's *Of Rift and Rivalry* by the end of 2014. Though we talked only once on the phone Taha stayed back with us as a regular contributor to *The Equator Line*.

When the idea of a Pakistan number struck us at *The Equator Line*, I wrote to him asking if he would like to guest-edit the issue. He readily agreed and worked hard putting together the book. While going through the pieces that had come from writers in Pakistan or members of its diaspora, I often thought of the afternoon at Wagah. On the other side of the gate – *enemy country* or an extension of our own? The restaurant owner's words came back: *Main kuchh idhar ka kuchh udhar ka.* That enigma envelops both sides across the border.

The uncertainty, guilt and a sense of deep hurt have troubled us – as much in Pakistan as in India. No history of Pakistan can be attempted without a chapter on Aligarh. And the tentative journey of the Indian civilization began in the lost city of Harappa at an intriguing moment of prehistory – long before Hinduism, long before Christianity and Islam. The sites and excavated ruins are all preserved in Pakistan. A culture flourishes not in prefabricated blocks but as misty chiaroscuro with a lot of give and take and as crossovers. Raising barriers within a culture always has had disastrous consequences.

Besides, the most distinct message of the mindboggling technological breakthroughs of the past quarter century is artificial barriers are certain to get blown away by the new tsunami of innovations. Are there any hurdles more flimsy and unreal than those between India and Pakistan? Those concerned about the subcontinent's future – wherever they are – need to absorb the hidden text of new technology and its relentless tidal waves and prepare for their impact.

True, cultural impulses cannot overwrite the long spell of terror from across the border, the huge toll it has taken of innocent lives. But Pakistani society too has been hit hard by religious extremism. And that makes this conversation all the more urgent.

Those separated from us by the barbed wire are much closer to us than any other peoples in the world. Truly we are blood brothers. The contributors to this issue are a few men and women who feel, think, look and write like us. You somehow know theirs are not writings for a magazine but letters from old neighbours in another street.

**Bhaskar Roy**