

## ONE MORE WALL...



They were like migratory birds, from across harsh territories, homing to the warmth of togetherness. I have seen them over the years – the peace activists from both sides of the border – meeting to find common ground, to do something to ease the tension between the two countries, while extremism prevailed as much in the primetime discourses as on the ground. They often met without the comfort of official hospitality. Neither fancy official venues like Vigyan Bhavan nor the chic conference halls of starred hotels played host to them. They mostly met at the India International Centre or similar places. But their gathering resonated with energy, generated an electricity that lit many hopes.

Like other meetings, the peace gatherings, too, had their stars: the flamboyant film director Mahesh Bhatt, who strolled towards Lodi Gardens during lunch break, a dozen admirers and news reporters in tow. A showman with a gift of the gab and the story of his own life straddling the Hindu-Muslim divide, Bhatt was

a big draw.

Human rights activist Asma Jahangir was synonymous with such initiatives. Forthright, vocal, unsparing, she was always at the centre of such turnouts.

A quieter but weightier presence was Rajmohan Gandhi. As a journalist I knew him well. Wise, knowledgeable, every inch a Gandhi, Rajmohanji is also a very well-informed, amiable, lively person. A ring of admirers usually formed in no time around his table in the IIC lounge.

Sometimes a book stall would be set up. I once saw Mani Shankar Aiyar's *Confessions of a Secular Fundamentalist* among the titles on display. Aiyar, too, was a darling of the liberal crowd. At the height of the Babri Masjid dispute in 1992, he had set out on a forty-four-day Ram-Rahim Yatra from Rameswaram to Ayodhya to drive home the secular viewpoint. A diplomat, who later joined politics and held ministerial portfolios, he has somehow retained his *enfant terrible* image.

During one such meeting, I listened with rapt attention to Mubashir Hassan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's finance minister after the 1971 Bangladesh War. Born in Panipat, the well-educated old-school politician was as conversant with the affairs of India as with those of his own country. Well, he could have been an MP here as well, I thought. A day later I interviewed him on his host's lawns. The Q&A appeared on the Times of India edit page.

For the veteran journalist Kuldip Nayar, a friendly, normal neighbourhood had always been an article of faith. I called him once in a while – a newsman's late evening drill for an offbeat

story. “Some friends have come from Pakistan, human rights activists. We met Mrs Sonia Gandhi in the evening – it’s about the release of a few Pakistani fishermen in our jails.” Often targeted by the hardliners, the veteran’s conviction was unshakable. He took many initiatives to keep the dialogue on between the activists from both sides.

The superstar of civil society activism was undoubtedly Imran Khan. His presence at a peace dialogue invariably drew a bigger crowd and even acquired a patina of glamour. Once, an activist friend invited me to speak at one such gathering. *Me?* I laughed. *Imran Khan will be there.* That was more than enough. I agreed. Pushing away the dust of years a day came back.

An India-Pakistan Test was on at Calcutta’s Eden Gardens. Barely out of university, I was like any other young man in the city – editing a little magazine, freelancing for newspapers, learning French. I used to visit the bookshop next to the Grand Hotel. As I stood talking to the owner about a new book, I saw a strange spectacle: on the pavement outside the hotel entrance a big crowd of college girls waiting for a glimpse of their hero. The potbellied policemen had no choice but to raise their lathis to push the frenzied girls away. Some of them stepped back towards the bookstore. *Is something happening?* I tried to strike a conversation with a girl. She looked at me with contempt in her eyes before pushing her way back to the hotel entrance. ‘It’s all for Imran; the Pakistan team is in the hotel.’ The stall owner laughed knowledgably. So did I – at my inadequacies.

When I reached the lecture hall in the IIC building, someone from

a Delhi think tank was speaking. Perhaps a retired bureaucrat, he was speaking in officialise, carefully building his argument. In white kurta-churidar, Imran was listening to him intently from the opposite side of the room. When his turn came, he spoke patiently ascribing the Iraq War to Dick Cheney's *oil politics*. With him around, cricket could not be far behind. 'Did you ever have the ambition of leading an India-Pakistan cricket team to take on the world?' a young man asked after he finished. Imran smiled uncertainly. There was a tap on my shoulder. The friend who had invited me. 'Come, you have to go to the India Islamic Cultural Centre in the next block.'

I was a little disappointed. *If I am speaking it must be before King Khan.*

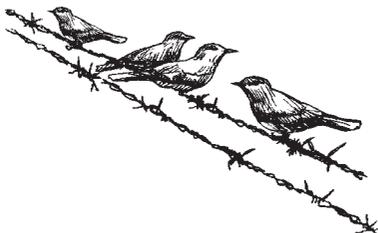
The line-up at the other venue was impressive even without a star. Among the panellists were a former Indian high commissioner to the UK, a former Speaker of Pakistan's National Assembly, an Indian activist based in the US, a Supreme Court lawyer and then, I. The audience – thin to begin with – grew a little later. There was only one television channel and a couple of newspaper reporters. My turn came before the big speakers. I talked about the essential plural character of the subcontinent, how this huge land mass had always accommodated everyone. And those who had come adjusted to the tone and temperament of the new land. For everybody here, culture was more important than religion. The 1857 Mutiny and the massive protests against the British decision to divide Bengal in 1905 were among the finest hours of the anti-colonial struggle, which submerged all other identities. The big names who spoke later referred to my speech.

The 26/11 terror attack on Mumbai dealt a terrible blow to such peace talks. The liberals from either side of the border did not come together for a long time. Extreme voices began to dominate the public discourse. Even an optimist like Mani Shankar Aiyar sounded despondent about the situation in Pakistan when I called him days after Salman Taseer's assassination.

While looking for a central theme for this issue of *The Equator Line*, we had an intense debate. Surprisingly, my colleagues strongly backed the idea of the subcontinent reinventing itself as a peace territory. *If the chips are really down, this is the time to throw up the idea.*

Europe is leaving behind its long history of warfare and sharp cultural incompatibilities and coming together. Even the hopelessly closed and xenophobic Burma is coming out of the frost of estrangement. Can India and Pakistan survive with intermittent border skirmishes and unending hostility? If the Berlin Wall could go...

Responses from both sides of the border to the issue came as further confirmation that the aspirations for a new subcontinent was really strong.



Bhaskar Roy  
*Editor in Chief*