

## At That Insurmountable Border

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### I.

The first time I saw the Wagah border was from the other side, on my first visit to Pakistan in 2005, for the Fourth Regional Dialogue on Peace and Youth Cooperation, organised by Bargad, an NGO based in Gujranwala in Pakistani Punjab. We drove in our friend's car from Lahore, along the canal that runs through the city. Huge mango trees shaded the roads, while young men jumped into the water to avoid the August heat. On the outskirts of the opulent modern city were villages. The roads were more potholes, less road. It was all too familiar. *Thehas* (handcarts) with succulent fruit and vegetables lined the road. We stopped to buy a few guavas, and munched on these till we reached 'Wagha', as the Pakistanis spell it. On either side of the road to India lay lush green fields. Tall crops swayed in the breeze. We parked the car and made ourselves at home in a *dhaba* (small eatery) selling tea, cold drinks and confections.

Of the two Indians and two Pakistanis who formed our group, it was easy to identify who was who from our clothes. Wearing jeans, Yours Truly and Male Colleague stood out like sore thumbs among *salwar-kameez* and *dupattas*. At the *dhaba* we picked up a mango drink, and one couldn't have told it from the 'Indian' Maaza or Slice, had the 'Pakistani' bottle not read Shezan.

The shopkeeper asked us which cities we belonged to, and we obliged with the requisite information.

"I'm from Chandigarh, it's the capital of..." I ventured. "Oh yes", he shot back. "I know. I watched the cricket match at Mohali. Bought a lot of *juttis* (leather footwear) and clothes". It was almost shocking that a *dhaba* owner in Pakistan would take the pains of coming to India for a cricket match. I'd thought only rich people did so. "I come from Dehradun", said my colleague. "I had relatives there", piped in a buddy of the shopkeeper's, who ran the neighbouring shop. We meandered over the subcontinent, each of us locating our pre-Partition history and connection somewhere on the other side. Lahore, Jalandhar, Kanpur, Multan, Peshawar, Taxila, Mumbai.

By this time we'd helped ourselves to tea as well, and had settled comfortably on the rickety benches, each mulling over our own thoughts.

"Beat that", my colleague grinned. "We walk ten minutes flat from here and we're back. Hassle-free." I could only give a weak smile, inwardly cringing at the memories of begging for a visa at the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi.

## II.

The visit clearance that had come at the eleventh hour was, as I later discovered, the norm for India-Pakistan visits. To get the stamps on our passports, we had to carry a letter from the Interior Ministry of Pakistan. Our hosts in Pakistan were faxing the letter, and we lied to the fax machine operator – we told him we were to receive a fax from Bangladesh. Male Colleague whispered, "What if he finds out it is Pakistan, and refuses to receive the letter?"

I found it surprising that my colleague, who had been to Pakistan the previous year for the third round of the conference, should be so nervous. He had gone as part of a larger group, and the formalities had been taken care of by some influential journalists and publishers in Delhi. This time round there were only two of us, and we both were utterly lost with regard to the paperwork. To top it all, there was a huge chance that the clearance letter may not have come through from the Pakistani ministry at all.

My colleague's agitation was infectious. As he paced furiously on the gravel near the fax booth, I became a little irritated. By this time we had started snapping at each other. When I couldn't take the tension any more, I walked into an adjoining McDonald's in the hope that a burger would take my mind off this situation. After waiting for an hour, we sent text messages to our hosts in Pakistan. They replied that we should be receiving the letter anytime. We finally received it after waiting for another 90 minutes. Even as we heaved a sigh of relief, the fax-machine operator gave us a suspicious glance, remarking, "*Yeh toh Pakistan se hai* (But this is from Pakistan)". Before he could say any more, we quickly thrust money in his hands and moved off.

At 5 am the next morning we made our way to the High Commission to queue up at the visa counter. Long before us, people from distant villages across India had been waiting, sleeping on the footpath outside the embassy. Almost all belonged to poor Muslim families, with a couple of middle-class exceptions. All had relatives across the border, and some had not met their kin since 1947. They would undertake this pilgrimage to Delhi almost every year, collecting their hard-earned rupees, buying train tickets to the capital and back in the hope of getting that stamp, only to spend the rest of their savings on the long journey to Pakistan. It was almost a *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) of another kind. A few individuals had received wedding invitations from across the border and wanted to attend the celebrations; but most were there simply because they were longing to meet a relative married into a Pakistani family.

We immediately saw the chasm of class difference between the two of us and our compatriots. Everything pointed towards their helplessness and to our position of advantage. While we filled up our visa forms ourselves, they were at the mercy of the typists and touts manning makeshift desks outside the embassy walls. While we could negotiate the price for typing services, they had to pay whatever was demanded. Servile to us, the typists and touts were taking the liberty of shouting and misbehaving with the others. Male Colleague and I got into a discussion, pitying the souls who were being cheated right in front of our eyes. We were frequently using the words 'us' and 'them'. I realised that my colleague, an upper-class Muslim without any roots or relatives across the border, had very little in common with the other visa applicants, apart from religion.

The visa counters were yet to open, so we began talking to the people around us. A lady who had spread her mat on the footpath invited me to sit with her. As we got talking, I discovered that she had come all the way from her village in Gujarat. There was finality in her voice. "I have been praying, and I know this time I will get the visa..." She wanted to meet her sister who lived in a village across the border. Like the other unprivileged applicants, she hoped that her name would be among those called over a microphone through a small hole in the high walls.

Soon the announcements began in earnest. Each gravelly proclamation was accompanied by a whoop of joy or happy tears for some, and silent disappointment for others. Yet, those whom Chance had spurned joined in the happiness of those chosen by Luck. My lady from Gujarat did not get the visa.

Our turn at the 'Business Visa' counter came, and the Visa Officer chose to talk to me rather than to Male Colleague. He asked me whether I could speak Punjabi, being born in Ludhiana. I couldn't – not fluently, anyway – but at that critical hour all the broken Punjabi I had marshalled in my lifetime came tumbling out. For 45 minutes I told the gentleman about my family, the weather, my studies, the fertile lands and the jovial spirit of the Punjab, before he deigned to thump a stamp on the passports.

### III.

The August sun was setting at Wagha/Wagah, and the air had begun to cool. Sarmad, our hostess Sabiha's brother and one of the key organisers of the conference, was pacing up and down the border post, frantically calling up his contacts in the Pakistan Army to somehow get permission for us to set foot on No Man's Land. This was a little strip of road, no longer than perhaps a kilometre, between the terrains of the two countries. There was a huge gate, some lookout structures and a customs post. Apart from these markers of the state, there were lush green fields on either side. From the *dhaba* where we stood buying refreshments, we couldn't see any barbed wire.

Observing the contiguity of the land, I mused at the stupidity of it all – history, politics, war... I also pragmatically considered that the farmers in that area must suffer the most,

from the continual policing and surveillance. Meanwhile, after several phone calls we understood that though Sarmad was well connected, his influence would regrettably not work in the stretch of limbo between the two countries.

There we were, the Indians and Pakistanis, making friends with each other and dreaming of hanging out together like any other set of buddies. The difficulty of doing something as simple as meeting over a meal, as friends do, made the four of us come up with bizarre ideas. Amid loud laughter that arose mostly from exasperation, Sidra suggested that we all come down to Wagha/Wagah, either side, during the change of guards, sit on the stands and wave to each other. Sarmad reasoned that it would be easier to see each other that way, at the border, rather than taking the trouble of travelling to each other's territories. And we could talk via SMS, @ Rs 5/- per message. Cold water was poured over this brilliant idea when we realised that mobile jammers are installed at the border. We laughed, at yet another subversive plan foiled. Earlier fantasies of a reunion had included dismantling the border, *a la* Berlin Wall.

A tall, strapping Pakistan Ranger stood guarding the entrance to the strip of No Man's Land. A stray dog happily walked through. We wondered if he had the visa and permission to cross on foot. We shamelessly pleaded with the Ranger. "*Bas, paanch kadam andar* (Just five steps inside)..." He smiled and nodded his refusal. We contented ourselves with getting photographs taken with him, and drove back to the city.



Image: Google Earth, 2005

My visit to the border from the Pakistan side made me recall the disappointing flight into Pakistan ten days earlier. I had really wanted to go by bus, but we had received our visas so late that the only option left was to take a flight to Lahore. By the time we boarded the aircraft, swallowed the bland, cardboard-dry Indian Airlines food and began sipping horrible watery coffee, the plane was landing at the Allama Iqbal International Airport, Lahore.

All this took a grand total of 35 minutes.

"Phooney", I scoffed, "never felt like we crossed a border. And why does our *domestic* airline fly there?"

#### IV.

In 2006, Bargad again invited the same delegates to Pakistan for the Fifth Regional Dialogue, mostly to maintain a sense of continuity. We were informed that we would be joined by three other delegates from Mumbai, who were to arrive directly in Karachi, the venue of the conference. For this second visit we booked seats on the Sada-e-Sarhad, the India-Pakistan bus service, well in advance.

At 3 am, braving the dark, we set off for Delhi's Ambedkar Terminus from where the bus departs. By 4 am, a sleepy crowd of passengers started streaming in. After depositing luggage for security checks, all passengers were ushered into a cramped room with uncomfortable seats. A television was tuned to a news channel. The small children present grew impatient and began playing among themselves, or wailed, or slept in their parents' laps. There were fewer seats than people, and the men chose to take turns standing to allow women and children to sit. Once again, amid the traditionally or *burqa*-clad passengers, my colleague and I were conspicuous in our T-shirts and track-bottoms.

Right before the departure at 6.30 am, the police officers manning the terminal growled at all the passengers to use the washroom, since the bus only had designated stops after longish periods. The golden Volvo had large comfortable seats, and was well airconditioned. We were handed bottles of water and newspapers before the bus began speeding towards Amritsar, accompanied by police jeeps sounding alarms of the kind one hears only when the PM's cavalcade is passing. The Z-Class security made me feel unusually smug, each time I looked at the poor unsuspecting suckers who were unceremoniously thrown off the road to make way for us.

I now saw the Wagah/Wagha border for the first time from India. There was a customs post, a few lookout structures and a huge gate. On either side were lush green fields. Unlike its counterpart, the Indian side of the border passage was hemmed with well-manicured flowerbeds. That, of course, did not take away one bit from the stringent customs checks, but perhaps because we were still in our own country, there was a sense of comfort.

That relaxed feeling was soon to get badly shaken, during the customs checks. The checking procedure made me nervous. I was not carrying any contraband, but felt nervous

as hell. What if they stop us here? What if they are speculating as to why two students are visiting the neighbouring country again?

It took a long time. On the other side of the passport-checking counter were computers that, to my utter shock, had a full e-dossier on each of us! For a moment I was simply stunned. All this while, they had kept an eye on us...! The polite men on duty, casually but neatly dressed, waving everyone through the ritual of customs clearance, were not clerks or ushers but intelligence agents, according to my colleague.

I squirmed in my seat and feverishly scoured my memory for anything I had done that might arouse their suspicion. What about my mild involvement in student politics at my predominantly left-wing university? Did they know that I had once cheated in a school exam? Did they know about my family? And worst of all, in the year between this and the earlier visit, had they intercepted the calls and text messages we had exchanged with our friends in Lahore?

Every irrational fear I could possibly entertain came rushing into my mind at that moment, and it took a few seconds to force them aside.

There were perhaps three Indians on the bus. Ours fears were belied once we were ushered in through customs in five minutes. The officials spent the rest of the three-and-a-half hours checking passengers from Pakistan. We sat on the benches outside, staring at the



Image: Google Earth, 2005

dogs, birds, fields, and coolies in electric-blue shirts. This is the first time I had seen coolies wearing this colour. At railway stations in India, without exception they all wear red. A man was selling cold drinks stuffed in a steel bucket, with good quantities of water and ice to keep the bottles cold, and a string of *bhujia* packets hanging from his arm. He offered us *lassi*, freshly made at the village nearby. Bored as we were, we took up offer with alacrity while waiting for our co-passengers. A white couple sauntered in from the Pakistan side on foot, wearing biking gear and pushing their machines. As if they were cycling into Delhi from Gurgaon.

The Indians, Pakistanis and coolies let out wry laughter. "As always, these *goras* (white foreigners) are free to come and go, and WE have to beg for visas..."

As we passed the political border, our Pakistani co-passengers heaved a sigh of relief at being able to re-enter their country – and we stiffened a bit. But the checks on the other side were quick, and there was high tea laid out. It was basic – untoasted sliced bread, butter, jam and eggs, with biscuits, tea and coffee. But it looked great after the three hours we had spent traversing a distance that takes just two minutes to actually negotiate.

## V.

A huge consignment of heroin was impounded a week later, at the same spot, on our way back from Lahore.

Dawn had come with a heavy downpour. Wet and chilled to the bone, the passengers made it to the bus depot at Gulbarg, Lahore. The depot was actually a large, drab and rundown house in a posh locality, surrounded by equally large but far more aesthetically decorated mansions. In the huge porch stood the Indian Volvo painted gold, the Sada-e-Sarhad, cheek-by-jowl with a parrot-green Pakistani bus of Chinese make. While passengers made vain attempts to dry themselves off, the baggage checks took place. Two men sitting behind two wooden tables asked us to open our suitcases and unzip our bags. They stuffed their hands into the luggage, felt around, pulled their arms out and thundered, "Okay, but open the CDs you're carrying back". Then, giving us sinister sidelong glances, they checked the CDs.

We would perhaps have got away with guns that day, but CDs? No way! Satisfied that we were only carrying pirated foreign films and not pornography, they let us go. The dark clouds cleared up and the bus made its way out of town, through the vibrant city centre, towards the border.

We had balked at the superfast manual checks at the Pakistani post that is housed in what looks like a colonial outhouse for a petty officer, the kind you find all over India. No X-ray machines, only a grim Ranger ploughing through my neatly packed luggage. I felt queasy at the thought of his hands shuffling my undergarments. However, I had no choice but to let it pass.

We got the Exit stamps on our passports and boarded the bus. And then, just as we had all settled in, we were all asked to get down.

It was a frightening moment. Our luggage was being whisked out and rechecked. I asked a few ladies what the commotion was about. My colleague answered instead: "Someone is smuggling drugs". This 'someone' had been caught, then stripped and searched in an adjoining room. The passenger in the seat next to him was also questioned and searched, but let off after being found innocent. I'd begun sweating by now, so it was a relief to go back into the bus. I obsessively kept thinking: what if the drugs had been hidden in our luggage...?

As we boarded, a jeep swished into the premises. A Pakistani intelligence officer got out, and was told, "*Heroin khadi hai, sahib, ek crore ki* (The heroin/e worth one crore awaits you, sir)". And all the men started guffawing. Overhearing them, safely inside the bus I began guffawing too.

This must be routine for them.

We crossed over, and within a minute my body felt free. The bus slowly rolled into India, divided from Pakistan by a kilometre, two minutes and many million blocked hearts and minds on either side...

Perfect balance, perfect sum of violence.

I'd enjoyed my time spent with our neighbours, who, after two visits and innumerable text messages, e-mails and phone calls, and some comfortable backslapping and cordial invective, could be legitimately called friends. But now I finally felt free to breathe in my *own* country, though the air was the same I had breathed in Pakistan.

I'd been careful of every movement just a kilometre away – how I dressed, how I spoke, my conduct. It was more than a little suffocating. So it was a joy to be back. Setting foot, or rather, tyres, on *my* soil, I stretched on my seat and looked with happiness at the expanse of fields. At customs, the officer was amused at my loot of *kajal* (collyrium) and Shan and National *masalas* (spices). Again we were let off in five minutes, while the Pakistani passengers were searched for almost two hours. Cute Labrador sniffer dogs were going over the guests' luggage. There were some children and several old people. And there was some mistake in the passports of one particular family. They looked harried.

What if I had been in their position?

In fact, I *had* been, on my first visit, *circa* 2005.

We had flown in to Lahore, and at the disembarkation counter at the airport, the official discovered that the year 2004, instead of 2005, had been stamped on my passport. I was immediately bombarded with looks of suspicion and doubt; and of course, I froze like the Arctic icecap. Funny, because my ears were hot, and flaming red. Terrifying thoughts collided in my head like frenzied atoms. The police will be called in, I shall be arrested, I shall be deported, I shall be sent back home on the next plane... Do they think I am a spy? Do I *look* like a spy in my black jeans and pink top? The tears were ready to fall, and a lump like a tumour had formed in the throat. The numbness was of a quality I had never experienced before. The mind had stopped working altogether. Male Colleague immediately went pale too.

It must have been divine intervention that the officer asked for the original visa form. The date on it was 2005, and he immediately acknowledged the error made at the Pakistan High Commission. Not without a reprimand, though. His soft but firm voice barked out, "You may proceed, but you ought to have checked. What if this got you into trouble?"

For the next half hour, I stayed in a kind of rigor from the experience. The memories of that time flooded in as I saw the weary and hapless elderly gentleman at the Wagha/Wagah post. He may have stood for hours, for days, even months, at the Indian High Commission in Pakistan. What if this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is squandered because of a clerical error? That is how high the stakes are.

It must have been an excruciating two hours, but eventually the Pakistani passengers were allowed to enter India.

## VI.

The following year, 2007, our hosts tried to arrange a third visit. We'd sent in the paperwork to fly to Karachi, where we'd spent about three days on the second visit. Then the Samjhauta Express bomb blasts happened on 6 March near Panipat, and our chances of travelling to Pakistan vanished with the smoke from the detonations. Two days later, our hosts confirmed the same via email.

We were disappointed, but more than that, irritated – like when you've planned to meet up with your gang of close friends, and that very day your parents happen to invite a relative home. For the first time, we weren't hinging our disappointment on the politics between the two countries or the issues plaguing them. The matter of meeting one another had become intensely personal.

We had become accustomed to the annual visits to our friends in Pakistan. It was unbelievable, the things we'd done there – from eating ice cream at a small parlour in Karachi, to attending posh parties in Lahore. We also got our 15 seconds of fame in the thick of all the excitement – appearances on two television shows. This being a first for us was an exciting matter, and added to that was the fact that we would never have achieved this celebrity status in India.

Exaggeratedly nervous about our being asked uncomfortable questions, answering in a politically insensitive way, and being punished or deported, Sabiha's sister Salma, a dedicated Bargad hand, conspired with us to concoct answers in case any awkward queries were put to us from the eager anchor. We guffawed through the make-up sessions that seemed to be mandatory for any studio guest, making it hard for the make-up man to do his job. On the first show, the questions were coming in to us from Dubai. We couldn't understand them fully, partly because of poor audio quality and partly because they were framed in chaste Urdu. Our inability threatened to destroy the live programme. By the second question, we began hearing some English words, took wild guesses, and answered. Among all the garbled replies we offered that evening, Male Colleague's replies were unsurpassed. In a valiant effort to avoid using English he chose to speak Sanskritised Hindi,

using words such as “*prajatantra*” and “*loktantra*” (synonyms for democracy), confounding the anchor and disturbing the thrust of the show.

Perhaps our best interactions with Pakistanis had involved making jokes about each other’s nations and their peculiarities through some of the more boring sessions of the conference we’d gone to attend. The class factor came into play, with the more urbane Pakistanis bonding with the metropolitan Indians, and the small-town Pakistani citizens forming their own groups.

Back in India, we missed Sarmad’s wit, Noor’s mischief, Abrar’s wonderment, Sidra’s passion for Patiala *salwars*, seven-month-old Nawwal’s antics, the precocity of Asma the maidservant, Sabiha’s grit, Salma’s friendship and Iqbal’s wisdom. We missed answering questions about Balaji Telefilms’ ‘K’ serials, discussing Indian and Pakistani politics, cricket and cinema. Even now, we laugh about the fact that on 14 August, Pakistan’s Independence Day, our neighbours celebrate by cutting a cake and then sitting down to play *antakshari*, singing Hindi film songs.

So much for borders!

We’ve stayed in touch, mostly over email. The silliness of the transnational banter has been raised to mutually comfortable levels. As the number of ethnic and nationality jokes and jibes increase, we’re opening up more to each other.

Every day, when our conversations include politically incorrect things about our respective governments and intelligence agencies, we fervently hope that Big Brother isn’t watching us.

Noor yearns to visit Goa. He plans to kidnap Male Colleague and me, take us there, and enjoy hanging out till the police catch up with him. He has no qualms about an indefinite stay in an Indian jail thereafter.

Every day, via the internet, we are breaking the writ that makes us each other’s enemies. We’ve found ways to do that.

Every day we are crossing and re-crossing that insurmountable border.

Noor, as always, has the last word: << If they don’t let us meet each other here, we can always meet up in London >>