

...Why?

At Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the Holocaust victims in Jerusalem a quote from a German Pastor, Martin Niemöller, summed up the Nazi monstrosity rather poignantly:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak for me.*

As I absorbed those prophetic words another impassioned plea flashed through my mind. The great English poet and political activist, John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*, appealed to the Parliament of England for the liberty of speech. This 1644 argument in scintillating prose is known as *Areopagitica*. If you read it even now, the ringing words electrify your being: 'Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.' For when silence is mistaken for acquiescence it becomes a crime to stay silent. As Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi put it rather succinctly, 'silence becomes cowardice when occasion demands speaking out the

whole truth and acting accordingly.'

At a point in time when freedom of speech and expression guaranteed in the Constitution as a fundamental right is coming under sustained assault in India where any criticism of the government is being dubbed as anti-national, questioning the establishment is equivalent to treason, and even intra-institution dialogue is being muffled, this collection of articles written over the past year or so mostly for various newspapers, would have remained scattered and perhaps even sucked into the black hole of time but for the efforts of friends at Palimpsest. They meticulously put them together between the covers of a book. This is my ode to free speech. Let freedom reign...

New Delhi

15 August 2017

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# Part I



## **Indo-Pak Relations: The Conflict-Peace Syndrome**

### **BRIDGE PARTITION**

There's a popular belief that at the people-to-people level, all is well between India and Pakistan, and the problem is really between the establishments in the two nations. But is that assumption really correct?

A retired Pakistani general narrated a story at a recent Track-2 event on how young officers posted at the border or Line of Control would see visiting civilian friends or relatives exult in excitement if they spotted an Indian soldier on the other side. Invariably, many would pick up a stone and hurl it at the Indian soldier to express 'hate' towards the 'enemy'.

A retired Indian officer recounted the spectre of pulp patriotism that plays itself out regularly at Wagah when the ceremonial lowering of the flag takes place in the evening. Civilians from both sides give full vent to their lung capacity while waving their respective national flags.

A ceremony described by a finance and external affairs minister in the Atal Behari Vajpayee government thus: 'We have that ugly ceremony at Wagah, almost vulgar, I don't know why we are continuing with it, but we are.' This machismo has been going on since 1959.

There's the hysteria over cricket matches between the two countries. The mood in both nations is supercharged as though it wasn't a game but the two countries were at war. Then

there's the problem of Pakistani textbooks in which Indians are vilified as cunning and scheming Hindus. Much like Jews were disparaged in the inter-war years and for centuries earlier in many parts of Europe.

The question that often pops up is: Are post-Partition generations in India blasé about Pakistan? The answer, unfortunately, is a big 'no'. While the generation that saw the ravages of Partition on both sides undoubtedly had scars seared into their collective psyche, there were some redeeming features too. In moments of nostalgia, they would also reminisce, perhaps among themselves, about the good times - how they had lived and played together before neighbours turned against neighbours. It perhaps made the trauma liveable.

But the memories they passed on to their children and grandchildren were ghoulish tales of savagery, butchery, pillage, rape, and slaughter. All unfortunately true. The effect this had on impressionable young minds was to crystallize the fear that everything and everybody on the other side was an evil ogre. The passed-on narrative thus got superimposed on an already tragic reality, reinforcing stereotypes in each family's folklore.

Complementing and supplementing this is the legacy of four wars, cross-border terrorism, radicalization, and a host of other negatives. Even in popular perceptions, there is hardly any positive strand in the past six decades that automatically comes to mind.

If there was not such a fertile field of subliminal hate in the hearts and minds of people on both sides, television channels wouldn't have been able to harvest it for TRPs. If one does a sentiment analysis of social-media platforms whenever anything on the India-Pakistan paradigm crops up, all that one hears are expletive-laden posts and vile pictorial depictions. It begs the obvious query: If all is well between the peoples of



India and Pakistan, then why are all these parameters negative? It therefore means that while they may be civil to each other socially, deep down, the animosity runs as strong as the antipathy between the two establishments.

Is there a need to transform this narrative or should we allow the discourse of hate and antipathy run its natural course? South Asia, the world's most populous region, is hostage to this India-Pakistan rivalry, but it is important to ensure that those living on opposite sides of the border or Line of Control see each other as real people in flesh and blood.

There may be many myths about the *pappi-jhappi* (hugs and kisses) revelry between the two peoples, but the fact is that only a minuscule number of India's 1.2 billion population have actually seen or met a Pakistani. The converse is also true. There's an urgent need to humanize them for each other. This can only happen if travel restrictions are eased. The ones that we fear don't apply for visas to cross over — they come with weapons in boats or over mountains. The ones we stop by making the visa-issuing process difficult end up becoming their core constituency. In the absence of an alternative narrative and a chance to size each other up, they become natural fodder for the purveyors of the hate propaganda.

In Europe, after the Second World War, young people could travel the length and breadth of the continent with just one rail pass. This was part of a well-conceived plan to whittle down the legacy of hatred that had consumed millions of lives in Europe.

Can a young person in South Asia with a single ticket backpack across the region? The answer is 'no'. It would not take a rocket scientist to figure out why.

Why can't we have joint concerts with both Indian and Pakistani artistes at Wagah and other border crossings at least twice a year, telecast live across both nations? Surely, if we can have military ceremonies daily, we can have music on two

days to demonstrate our shared syncretic cultural heritage. It's strange that while you can read every Pakistani newspaper and see every TV channel on the Internet, they are proscribed in India. The converse is true in Pakistan too, though many Indian channels are available over a DTH platform. While rabid ones should not get downlinking permission, the question is: How successful has the government been in controlling their illegal proliferation.

Similarly, why hasn't any entertainment channel thought about a Masterchef India-Pakistan or South Asia, or a street food face-off taking the region's culinary diversity into the homes of ordinary people? Why is the hunt for young music sensations limited to the territory of a country? Why can't we have a South Asian version of the Eurovision Song Contest?

While these may not lead to any solution of the so-called 'core issues' between the two countries, these are really premised on the classical Westphalian concept of a nation state, a construct based on borders and geographical boundaries between nations, which the Internet and social media are making almost irrelevant with virtual sovereign universes like Facebook Nation and Twitter lands being in play.

What these initiatives might do is perhaps mitigate the latent bitterness we have internalized as a people. It would make the resolution of contested geographical questions more palatable as these would ultimately involve some give and take if they don't become simply redundant. It is important to get the acoustics right and achieve 'real peace' in our times. Not, of course, one that is of the Neville Chamberlain variety!

*The Asian Age*

24 July 2016