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Face-Off:

Peacock Nationalism on the Pakistan-India Border

By Nicholas Schmidle

MAY 2006

IT'S THE START OF mango season here and, already, connoisseurs are gabbing about a rare species that appears every other year for two days during the third week of July. If you aren't lucky enough to eat one (which means knowing someone well connected enough to find one), so the mango snobs say, you really can't even say that you've had a mango. But if you do miss out, I hear, there are 27 other varieties of mango grown in Pakistan. Sweet ones. Big ones. Small ones. Orange ones. Green ones. Just wait, people say, you are going to love 'em. This is usually when I mention that I was in India a few years ago and am somewhat familiar with the Subcontinental mango craze. "No, no, no," comes a typically dismissive response, "Our mangoes are *much* better than the ones in India."

Of course, neither India nor Pakistan ever officially challenged the other country to a mango-growing contest. This competitiveness is best understood as a product, like cricket and nuclear weaponry, of a decades-long rivalry between the neighboring countries. But regardless of whether you're talking about mango season, a cricket match or a nuclear test, each is certain to throw Pakistanis into a nationalist frenzy. This nationalism itself is a rare event, one perhaps as unlikely as a one-time visitor sampling the prized biannual mango species. Pakistanis joke that the only place that they identity themselves, first and foremost, as Pakistanis, is on their passport. Otherwise, they are Baluchis or Shias or Waziris or Sindhis way before they are prepared to profess their loyalty to Pakistan.

But there is always one thing that the whole country can rally against. India.

Culturally, India and Pakistan have much in common. The people, after all, lived together for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Hindi and Urdu, the two countries' respective languages, are almost exactly alike; the only difference lies in the script. Urdu uses a script similar to Arabic, Persian, Dari and Pashto; Hindi uses the Davanagari script, common to Nepali and several North Indian tongues. The cuisines are also similar; regardless of whether you are in Lucknow or Lahore, you can order a plate of *dal*, a lentil-based dish, and a *lassi*, a cold yogurt drink. The differences crop up when you start considering religion and history.

Pakistan was created in August 1947 as a homeland for Indian Muslims. It was drawn on the map by an English lawyer named Cyrus Radcliffe. Radcliffe's main qualification, according to the British Governor-General in India at the time, was that he had never spent a day in India nor knew anyone there. So the unbiased man arrived in Delhi in July 1947. On August 13, he submitted his report. The next day, Pakistan and India were divided and declared independent. Hindus fled to India. Muslims to Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands of people were slaughtered as they migrated to their new homelands. The Line of Partition, like other arbitrary borders left over from colonial times, has been contentious ever since.

Since I missed out on the much-hyped Indo-Pak cricket matches that were

Photo: Rikki Schmidle

Swimming in the canal

held in Pakistan earlier this spring, I decided that the Indian border was probably the next best place to witness an exhibition of genuine Pakistani nationalism. For stoking national sentiments, you just can't go wrong with guns and cross-border stares. Besides the rock memorial in Islamabad modeled on the craggy mountain in Baluchistan where Pakistan tested its first nuclear weapon in May 1998, the Wagah Border crossing might be the most celebrated spot in Pakistan when it comes to generating patriotism. Every afternoon, a border-closing ceremony puts Pakistani and Indian border guards face-to-face as they lower their respective flags and try to out goose-step each other. One 30-second television advertisement for an upcoming hockey match between India and Pakistan features 25 seconds of Pakistani border guards drilling at Wagah — and five seconds of actual field field-hockey highlights. When I mention Wagah to my Pakistani friends, no one even attempts to play cool. "It's totally awesome," they say. "You *have* to see it for yourself!"

ON A FRIDAY AFTERNOON in the middle of April, I hired a fellow named Nadeem to drive my wife and me from Lahore to the Wagah Border. The trip took less than an hour. Over the course of the previous night in Lahore, summer came suddenly and air temperatures exceeded 105 degrees Fahrenheit before lunchtime. In the center of the city, a cloud of dust and motorized-rickshaw/automobile exhaust hovered a few feet off of the road like a germaphobe over a truck-stop toilet seat. While we sat in traffic, sweating onto the vinyl seats, Nadeem pointed to a brand-new Hyundai, pumping A/C with the windows rolled up, and told me that, only a few days from now, he planned to buy one for himself.

Most of the road to the Wagah Border parallels a canal; on the day we went there, the banks were strewn with the clothes of young boys taking a swim. Most of them were at the cusp of adolescence and there was lots of playful splashing. Some did flips off an overpass. The youngest of the boys who can get away with it, ran around naked, trying to dry off without a towel. Farther away from the city, farmers allowed their water buffaloes to enjoy a cool soak. Nadeem giggled when we passed the naked kids and the water buffaloes. I pledged to avoid the tap water at all costs.

Just a few miles before the border is Batapur, a small town the color of burlap. It is the last town before India. The buildings were in faded disrepair and the streets spotted with crumbled piles of rock and brick that resembled giant, coarse, anthills. The main road was, at times, the consistency of baby powder, and each vehicle that passed through left behind a wake of puffy dust. Women wore colorful scarves tied around their faces. Except for a "welcome" sign at one end of the town, these scarves were the only thing disrupting Batapur's monochromatic landscape.

The welcome sign was mix of billboard and gateway. It arched, Shinto-style, over the street and was mostly red. At the top was white lettering that read Batapur. The font was distinct. Alien corporate familiarity. (I am not counting the hand-painted Pepsi logos spelled P-E-S-P-I or the Coke logos that hark back to the Coke is it! era.) Every shopping center in Pakistan has at least one — and as many as three — Bata stores, all part of the shoe conglomerate with thousands of retail stores around the world. Some company history: back in 1930, a Czech named Tomas Bata visited pre-Partition India and, like any enterprising shoemaker would have, noticed the hordes of people walking barefoot. Almost immediately,

he began orchestrating Bata's expansion into the Subcontinent; within months, his construction teams broke ground on a perfect piece of land, equidistant between major urban centers in Lahore and Amritsar. By 1942, the manufacturing plant was finished and Batapur — which, in Hindi, means "place of Bata" — was born.

Today, Lahore and Amritsar are separated by more than just a few dozen miles. Radcliffe's Line of Partition placed the sister cities in different countries and ensuing territorial disputes-turned-wars have made the boundary one of the most fiercely guarded borders in the world. Shuttling shoeboxes over it is almost unthinkable. Since independence in 1947, India and Pakistan have fought three full-blown wars and several skirmishes. In each instance, military strategists have heaped significance on the Wagah Border because of its proximity to critical urban centers.

On September 6, 1965, during the second Indo-Pak War, the Indian Army's 15th Infantry Division marched into Pakistan determined to sack Lahore. They passed within a few miles of Batapur, yet the Indian Army Chief, General J.N. Chaudry, had more than shoes on his mind. He reportedly assured his soldiers that, by nightfall, they'd be drinking whiskey at Lahore's upscale Gymkhana Club. They got close. But just as the 15th Infantry was preparing to storm Lahore International Airport, Ameri-

Photo: Rikki Schmidle

Bicycling in Batapur

can diplomats intervened and mediated a ceasefire. Not only did this give U.S. citizens enough time to scoot out of the country, it also slowed General Chaudry's advance and prevented the Indian Army from taking Lahore.

Ceasefire or no ceasefire, India and Pakistan's brand of brinkmanship has, since 1947, been totally unmatched. Where else do you find two sworn enemies living side-by-side, armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, infused with antagonizing religious sentiments, and comprising almost one-fifth of the world's population? What makes this rivalry truly unique, however, is that every evening at sundown, it is performed and sold to paying customers for 10 rupees each.

ON THE ROAD FROM Batapur to the border, we followed a school bus, close enough to be considered drafting, when it hit a patch of moon dust. Suddenly, it was like a tan pillowcase had been thrown over the car windows. I couldn't see anything outside, and, I presume, neither could Nadeem. He held the wheel with both hands; otherwise, his laughter and refusal to slow down suggested that he was used to such inclement challenges.

It's true what they say about your senses compensating for one another in the case of failure. The windows were rolled up tight and the air vents closed. We were engulfed in khaki. Yet my mouth and nose were working overtime: dust tasted like uncooked couscous and the air smelled like burning rocks and dirt and trash brewed with dank cow dung. And I still didn't know how close were to the bus.

Nadeem acted nonchalant and, perhaps to ease my concern that we were seconds away from decapitation via the school bus's rear bumper, he seemed to be reveling in his blind navigation. I trusted that, as a husband and father of two, he wasn't taking unnecessary chances. His city driving — dodging motorized rickshaws, donkeys, fruit carts, other cars, stoplights and police officers — was admittedly superb. This was something altogether different. "Nadeem, can you see where you are going?" I asked. "No problem, Mr. Nicholas," he responded with a smile that revealed a mouthful of teeth dripping with maroon juice from the *pan*, a local tobacco product, he was chewing.

When the dust cloud dissipated a few minutes later, we were on the wrong side of the road, pointed toward a field. Directly in front of us was a row of mud-brick homes with piles of water buffalo dung in front.

Nadeem steered us back straight, and I saw a woman reach her arm into the dung-pile and shape a handful of feculence into a patty. The patties are dried and used for cooking fuel. An entire wall of her home was covered with them, all stamped with her knuckle-print, presumably to prevent one family from confusing their set of fecal discuses for another. Behind the buffalo dung and even the buffaloes themselves were phallic-shaped kilns for making bricks. The bricks were stacked up like ramparts across the southern horizon. You could identity successful brick-makers because their tall chimneys were chalked with labor and toil, like giant candles covered with sooty candle wax. Clouds of black smoke waited for a breeze and the burning dirt smelled carcinogenic.

The last site before the Wagah Border was a small army base. Nadeem mentioned that his brother trained here once. Camouflage barracks and a few contraptions, like dangling ropes and a wall without a stepladder, were most likely part of an obstacle course. The whole complex was surrounded by an unimposing barbed-wire fence, good for keeping out stray water buffaloes.

A PARKING ATTENDANT GREETED us and pointed to a patch of grass. Even though, hours later, our car was blocked in on all sides, the attendant, if nothing else, lent the event an air of organized entertainment.

Like most international boundaries, the Wagah Border has several layers of defense. Everyone was waiting outside of an initial tall gate. Some were standing in the sun, but most were bunched under cloth tarps that extended off the front of snack stands with signs stamped with Mountain Dew logos. The stands sold 2-liter bottles of soda and assortments of fried chips and nuts to spectators. A smaller crowd clogged the window of the unoccupied ticket booth.

While waiting for the booth to open, I met a guy in his late 20s named Ahmad. He was of medium height and skinny, with a rapidly receding hairline. Ahmad was a resident of Faisalabad, a city roughly four hours from Wagah, and was in town for a few days to visit friends. Unfortunately, he told me, none of them wanted to come. So he came alone. We spoke in a mixture of English and Urdu. "This is important for Pakistanis," Ahmad said, pointing toward the border.

"India?" I asked.

"No," he replied through sucked teeth, "this ceremony."

There were signals from the ticket booth about imminent opening and a throng of men jumped into line, with all the usual pushing and shoving. Just watching from a distance makes you anxious about losing your place. Ahmad insisted on buying a ticket for my wife and me, and he had a good spot, about four back from the front. The ticket cost 10 rupees, or around 25 cents.

Minutes later, a couple of school buses honked their way through the throng and drove past the first gate that is closed to the rest of us. Then, from the Indian side, a gold-painted bus passed with writing on the side that read *Delhi-Lahore-Delhi: A Bridge Between Two Nations*. The Delhi-Lahore route was resumed in 2003, after a two-year

Photo: Rikki Schmidle

Ahmad (in glasses) holding his place and trying to avoid being burned with a cigarette.

suspension following the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001 by Islamic militants tied to *jihadi* groups in Pakistan. Islamabad and New Delhi see this bus route, as well as the newly christened one in Kashmir, as part of a wider dialogue of peace between the two countries. The bus was escorted by a pickup truck brimming with gunmen.

When the gate finally opened, men and women were separated into different lines to hand over their tickets. We merged back into one and walked into a shed for security checks. The line snaked back and forth. I kept seeing the same people again and again. You can develop weird, unspoken relationships with people in such lines. Then we got to the metal detectors. Everyone set it off but only one in ten were frisked.

An usher in uniform was outside the security shed and in front of the amphitheater, pointing people to their seats. Men on one side, women on the other. Foreigners were singled out and led to the front row. I told the usher that Ahmad was my friend and was sitting with me. The usher nodded and waved him through. There were a few other Pakistanis in front, with plenty of Japanese tourists scattered throughout. Most of the Japanese men carried a still camera in one hand and a video camera in the other. Fanny packs in full view. Their wives wore floppy hats and sandals with big heels.

Everyone filed into an amphitheater made of brick and at least two or three stories tall. The fresh brick reminded me of Camden Yards in Baltimore. Music from each of Pakistan's primary subcultures — Baluchi, Sindhi, Mohajir, Punjabi, and Pathan — came from the speakers and some people were singing along. Near the top of the amphitheater was a portrait of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, "father" of Pakistan, and underneath it, in gold Urdu characters, writing that said this is "Freedom Gate." The whole setup had a Sea World-like quality to it, except that instead of the main attraction being an acrobatic whale, soldiers paced around in hats topped with cloth palm fronds.

A single-lane road split the male and female sections. Schoolchildren who came by bus sat with women on the other side of the road. A young girl, no more than 10, tried to sit with her father on the men's side but an Army Ranger with a machine gun and a short beard told her she had to move. Just behind my seat one family laid out high tea on a couple of picnic tables and another was snacking on kebabs and Cokes brought from outside. Likewise, someone sitting beside me in the bleachers poured a cup of soda for Ahmad and me.

When the Indians started coming in to fill the bleachers on their side, they were mostly all smiles. They wore bright colors and women were sitting beside their husbands/brothers/boyfriends. A Sikh man with a red turban pointed his Camcorder at Pakistan and waved with his other hand. One woman pushed a baby in a stroller while blowing kisses. I read a sign held in the air that said *We Love You Pakistan*. Ahmad, like a few other men, most of

Photo: Rikki Schmidle

Rangers on parade

Photo: Rikki Schmidle

I can raise my foot higher than you

the schoolchildren, and the majority of the women, waved back. He informed me that he has family, after all, still living in India. Some of these people could be his cousins.

In response to all this goodwill, though, most of the Pakistani men sitting in the amphitheater were getting nervous. How could they wave back to their sworn enemies? There is only one response in times like these. That's when someone cried out *Allahu Akbar*, God is great, to the satisfaction of all.

ONCE THE FIRST PERSON screamed *Allahu Akbar*, the whole mood changed. The next song's lyrics were "Our Flag is More Beautiful than Your Flag." The same schoolchildren, who just minutes ago were laughing with one another in their innocent blue uniforms, were now leading many of the chants. *Pakistan Zindabad*, Long Live Pakistan, and *Allahu Akbar* were two favorites. Slogan-makers learn their trade at a young age here.

The actual ceremony lasted about an hour. It consisted of ten elite Rangers marching, one by one, from an elevated platform near the back of the amphitheater to the border. Each of the Rangers was exceptionally tall, plus they were wearing a hat that stood like a peacock tail on top of their heads. They march briskly with straight legs and long steps, while waving their appropriately straight and long arms. The crowd cheered and applauded each one, presumably to march faster. Just before reaching the gate, they turned on a heel and began goose-stepping and stomping their feet on the ground.

The Pakistanis had a mascot. He was an old guy with a white beard and a single, Jurassic-era tooth that looked like a Pink Eraser. He had on an entirely green outfit that looked made of felt. The back of his shirt read, in Urdu, *Pakistan Zindabad*. He waved a huge flag. He was long past his slogan days, so he just stood, arms akimbo and fists clenched. Whenever he did this, the other spectators cheered louder, chanted more, and cried out *Allahu Akbar*.

The main event involved India and Pakistan lowering their respective flags. This was done, as was every other aspect of the afternoon, in complete coordination with the other country. They would be hard pressed to find a choreographer who could improve any of these steps. At the end, two soldiers exchanged a stack of local newspapers and gave one another a firm handshake. Congratulations, another day without war. After that, they spun around and marched back toward the amphitheater; the gates were locked and the border was closed for the day.

Ahmad looked satisfied, almost to the point of exhaustion. No part of him doubted that those 10 rupees were the best 10 rupees he had ever spent. Perhaps the welcome sign in Batapur and the Mountain Dew-embossed snack stands weren't the only bit of commercialism around here after all. ❑

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Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • INDIA

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her jouralistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

Cristina Merrill (June 2004-2006) • ROMANIA

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceauscescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the Economist Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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