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Deepening the Pakistan-India divide

As I tried to enter the IHC building's visa section, a swarm of Pakistani intelligence agents interrogated me.

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Six years ago, while on a speaking tour of nearly 25 schools, colleges and universities across India, I discovered that only a handful of students had ever seen a living, breathing Pakistani. None had heard an academic from across the border speak. A 12-year old school student, who obviously did not know Hindi and Urdu were similar, wondered aloud how a real Pakistani could be speaking their language. For these puzzled students, Pakistanis are alien people belonging to an adversary country, not next-door neighbours.

The numerous misconceptions and misunderstandings I encountered must be still greater today. With pre-1947 family links slowly withering away, the two countries are travelling on separate economic and cultural trajectories. As travel barriers become ever higher, their respective populations are becoming progressively more unfamiliar and estranged from the other.

This is by deliberate design. Not long ago, Indian scientists and professionals participated in conferences in Islamabad, cricket matches drew large numbers into either country and schools occasionally sent their students over to the other side. But now tourist and visitor traffic is a trickle. Both South Asian states share the responsibility. Visas are the obvious control instruments. In principle, technology and ease of travel should have made things easier. Not so. While applying for an Indian visa that would enable me to speak at a conference in Delhi, I was initially pleased to see that I could now apply online instead of the older, cumbersome procedure. But, as it turned out, there is a special form for Pakistanis that demands excruciating, irrelevant minutiae. A technically poor web portal design adds to the frustration.

Why the special treatment for Pakistanis? The Indian establishment says it fears terrorism. But while reasonable caution is understandable, one could have hoped for a sense of proportion and a more reasoned approach. The overwhelming majority of Pakistanis who apply are the aged and the infirm, professors and doctors, businessmen and professionals, and the occasional tourist. Armed terrorists from Pakistan have indeed crossed borders. But they have gone by boat, crawled under fences and climbed difficult mountains. To penetrate airports or checkpoints, and cross multiple hurdles, is not the terrorist route. But let's say that you still somehow put together an application. Thereafter you must present yourself at the Indian High Commission (IHC). For this, you must somehow obtain permission to enter Islamabad's 'Red Zone', the highly fortified diplomatic enclave which houses foreign embassies. Getting past the first security checkpoint, bristling with machine guns placed behind concrete barriers, is no easy task. But, as I recently discovered, the ordeal will have just begun.

As I attempted to enter the IHC building's visa section, a swarm of Pakistani intelligence agents surrounded me. Their body language was intimidating, their manner offensive. As with other visa applicants, question followed question. They demanded my personal identification, phone numbers, family details, what was to be discussed in the conference that I was to attend, invitation letters and proof of correspondence. All this while sneering at my patriotism. Halfway through this interrogation, I lost patience. If I was spying for India, why on earth would I come for a visa interview? But these uncouth men were executing a political agenda and not open to reason. In their frozen mindset — and that of their masters — India was Pakistan's enemy number one. Faced with unexpected resistance, the underlings called their superior. Expectedly, he supported his men who, he said, were defending the safety and security of Pakistan. What did Pakistan's national security have to do with harassing visa applicants? An argument became inevitable. He and his men were unmoved by the fact that their spy institution had spectacularly failed to gather intelligence necessary for protecting the life and property of Pakistani citizens. In fact, it had lost three of its regional headquarters to attacks by religious terrorists and suicide bombers. Home-grown terrorists have killed many more Pakistani soldiers and citizens than were lost in Pakistan-India wars since 1947.

My admission into the building was refused, a violation of my rights as a Pakistani citizen as well as of international law. They

won, I lost. They had achieved their goal of keeping a Pakistani from visiting India. The gulf between the countries grew just a tad wider. I do not know how it is from the Indian side. Are the requirements for a visa just as dauntingly obtuse? Do RAW agents harass and insult those Indians applying to the Pakistan High Commission in Delhi for a visa? Let the angry Indian speak up from his side of the wall, as I have from mine.

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