

It was July, 1997, and I was on my first visit to Pakistan. In Islamabad, gargantuan government edifices glittered behind freshly painted wrought-iron fences: glamorous palaces of Pakistani politics in marble and brass majesty. Just before dusk, I was riding along a smooth six-lane boulevard in the back seat of a taxi, with the doors locked and the windows down. On my right, an opulent skyscraper flashed past, adorned with bright blue tiles and curved panes of graceful glass arching over the entrance. Greenery and gardens lined the wide, well swept thoroughfares of a model city—shopping complexes with ample parking, Quaid-e-Azam University with acres of vacant land. No mildewed colonial architecture, no winding ancient alleyways and gullies sprawling away from the main roads around which urban planners had to circumnavigate. No motor rickshaws allowed in Islamabad: their fumes would blacken the zinnias and marigolds which adorn medians and traffic circles.

When my taxi driver asked me in English, “From which country?”, I replied, “*Main America se aayi huun.*” (I come from America.) In surprise, he responded, “*Urdu kahaan seekhi*” (Where did you learn Urdu?) I told him I had studied Hindi in India. “But,” he insisted, “you are speaking Urdu.” I tried to explain that besides the script, the two languages are virtually the same: “*Aapki zubaan, unkl bhasha, ek hi hai.*” He was amazed, but not amused. “*Nahin hai*” he argued. “They are not the same!” I asked him if he had ever seen Indian films or listened to Indian music. Naturally, he had. I enquired, “Did you understand the dialogue and songs?” “*Zarur.* . . Certainly,” he responded, “it’s in Urdu.”

India Through Pak Eyes

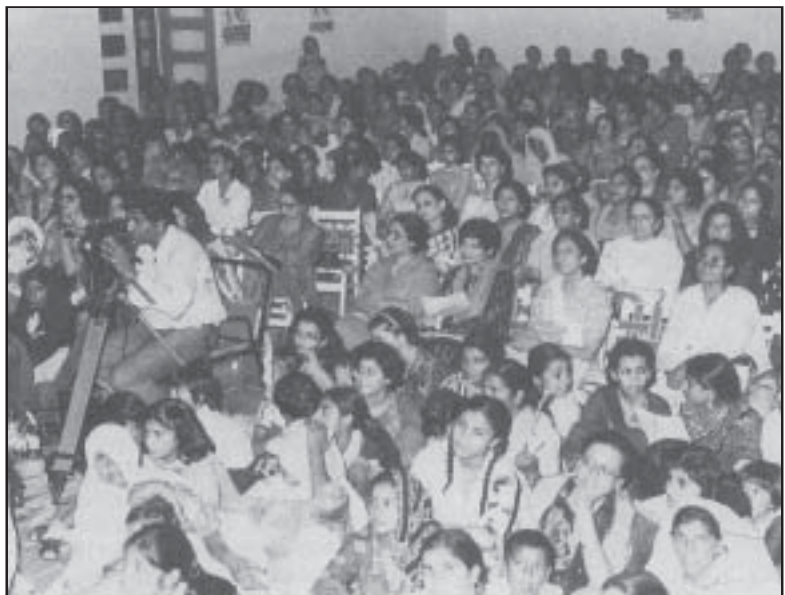
○ Yvette C. Rosser

When my taxi-wala heard that I had lived in India, he asked, “Which country is better India or Pakistan?” Having spent only a few weeks in Pakistan, I was certainly not qualified to answer that question. The people look quite similar, the fabrics and clothes they wear are almost the same, also the architectural styles of the cement homes of the middle class, with chipped marble floors, bathrooms with waist high faucets and plastic buckets, servants sweeping the floors, children studying their lessons to please their parents.

Similar hand and facial gestures in animated conversation, that particular sideways nodding of the head, shanty towns near railway stations, and deep red betel juice deposited in dark, dank corners.

Conspicuous displays of wealth juxtaposed with destitution. Men urinating in public. People disdain traffic rules, bus drivers think they own the road. *Chai* (tea) stalls, mangoes, bullock carts, sidewalk hawkers, boys playing cricket in vacant lots. A family of four on an outing, perched together on a motor-scooter—all is and more was common on both sides of the international border.

When the Pakistanis heard that I had spent time in India, they inevitably asked questions about life there and my opinion of Indo-Pak relations. There was tremendous curiosity about India, combined with great distrust and condemnation. Most people told me that the “quality of life is better in Pakistan,” even if, as several commented, “The betel



Indians or Pakistanis : Can one tell the difference?

nuts are not as good in Pakistan.” Several Pakistanis told me, “We have better highways. They may have more factories, but their roads are so bad that they can’t transport the goods.” I was told that by Pakistanis that they are falling behind in literacy. Schools and ghost schools are only part of the problem. One prominent social activist told me that “If it weren’t for NGOs, few girls in rural Pakistan would go to school.”

While visiting Multan, I took photographs of several lovely university students. Upon seeing the pictures, a Pakistani friend of mine assumed they were of young Indian women because they were “smiling and pretty like Indian girls.” I told him that Pakistani girls look just the same as Indian girls. In Multan, we had been in a courtyard, with no men around, where the ladies were free to smile and be lovely. Many Pakistani women have told me that in public they have to scowl and look serious, and that it is unseemly to laugh in public. Undoubtedly, the presence of women is the most noticeable difference between the street scenes in India and Pakistan, where far fewer women are out and about, laughing and talking in the marketplace, haggling for mangoes at the corner store. Thousands of women in Pakistan drive cars, but you never ever see them, as in India, riding a motorcycle or a Vespa.

One young man who had been selected to go for a cricket match in Amritsar a few years ago—that being his only visit to India—said that the thing which amazed him the most was seeing “women driving motorcycles and Vespas”. He had never seen a woman driving a scooter in Pakistan and was taken aback by the large number of Indian women who were going to work and to the market on their motorcycles, their *dupattas* tied behind them,

waving in the breeze.’ Several women in Pakistan mentioned Hudood laws as detrimental to women. They thought that Indian women, in general, had more freedom. I was told by two attractive young teachers at a university in Lahore that “Pakistani girls have to act serious all the time so that they won’t draw attention to themselves. If you laugh and enjoy in public, people think you are unseemly.” The principal of a girls’ school in Lahore commented that “In India, girls are better educated.” One young lady told me that “Hindu girls marry complete strangers, but we marry our cousins, who have been our childhood friends.” For some reason, there was a consensus among a group of girls I met, that Indian men are “more faithful to their wives”. It was generally agreed that Pakistani men are “taller than Indian men, and they make better soldiers”. There was no disagreement about one thing, however: all the girls told me, “We love Shahrukh Khan!”

Several scholars complained, “Why do all Western scholars want to do research on India rather than Pakistan?” Another, who had studied in the USA, said that “the libraries in American universities are filled with shelf after shelf of books about Indian history and culture—picture books and in-depth studies that portray the country in a positive light.” But, he added, “the solitary shelf devoted to books about Pakistan was filled with titles about a failed state.” A couple of weeks later, another scholar told me that “In America, libraries are full of books about India—no one writes positive books about Pakistan.”

Many Pakistanis fear that satellite dishes, which are now visible across the urban and rural landscape from Hyderabad to Quetta, will usher in India’s cultural dominance over Pakistan. There is

also some defensiveness in the recognition that Hollywood is far more popular and influential than Lollywood. A businessman in Islamabad asserted, “Between American and Indian TV, we’re losing our culture!” Two young professionals—a brother and sister in Lahore—said to me, “We love Indian movies, but we hate India. We betray our patriotism and parents when we listen to Indian music, but we love it anyway.”

Three years ago, in 1997, many people believed that “Democracy is here to stay in Pakistan,” though, as one educationist mentioned, “the voters have few real choices.” Most Pakistanis I spoke to felt that “The BJP is proof that Indian politics is disintegrating into communalism.” Many people commented on the rise of the BJP and its affiliates. A progressive feminist in Lahore lamented that for years they looked to India as a model of secular governance, “But now what are they doing? They are aping our theocratic state! I wish they wouldn’t go that way. It will make our efforts to delink religion from politics that much more difficult.”

The only thing about which the people I spoke with agreed is that, “All politicians are corrupt.” Corruption was cited as the worst problem preventing economic progress: “Corruption is crippling us. Everyone wants a cut.” A Sindhi nationalist in Karachi told me sarcastically, “There are more Toyota Landcruisers with tinted windows in Karachi than Sicilians in the Mafia.” One person laughingly told me that in India “They’re just as corrupt as we are, only they are more democratic about it!” □

Yvette Rosser is doing her Ph.D on the history textbooks in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, at the University of Texas, Austin, USA.