

My 4 days in Pakistan

Thought

Atari Wagah, April 1982 - I stood at the border and admired the beautiful sunset in our neighbouring country. Scanning the faces on the other side of the fence, I wondered about their lives, their feelings and wished that I could speak to them and find out more about them. Perhaps, seeing the curious look on my face, the Pakistani sentry invited me to cross the line of control but I dared not cross over for fear of being imprisoned as an illegal alien or even worse.

Memories faded and I forgot the event. Twenty five years later my memories were rekindled and I wished to see Lahore. However, it was not an easy process. Convincing my wife and parents was an uphill task. I surmised that I would get a visa to Pakistan first and decide about the visit later.

Visa

I went to the High Commissioner of Pakistan at 2/50 G Shanti Path, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi <pakhc@nda.vsnl.net.in> phone 011-26110601. I joined the queue at 9 am along with my father. By 11 am it seemed that the queue was moving rather slowly and all applicants might not be disposed of on that day itself. I started looking for alternatives. I asked my father to continue the wait in queue while I enquired about the proceedings. I was told that senior citizens could go inside the High Commission without waiting in queue and one escort could join them.

Papa and I were inside the High Commission within the next 10 minutes. We were advised that there is no tourist visa agreement between the two countries. An Indian national can go to Pakistan only if he/she was born in Pakistan or he/she has relatives there and vice-versa. Our trip looked like it was about to get over before we even started, since we fulfilled neither of the two conditions.

I argued with papa that when there are no set guidelines, then the head of state, in this case the President of Pakistan will have powers to exercise his discretion and grant a

visa. According to delegation of powers, these must be vested with the High Commissioner.

I wondered whether anyone else like us had ever visited Pakistan in the past. The visa application agents outside the High Commission advised us that such visas had been granted in the past but extremely rarely. However, they advised us to procure fictitious business invitations and then procure visas, as was being done by other tourists.

I approached the consulate again. They advised me that since relations between the two countries were very strained at the time, we should wait for a few months. Subsequently, they would reconsider our application.

However, I went ahead with the application anyway, rather than wait. The same was not responded to. My phone calls did not yield any result either. We visited the High Commission again looking for an answer to whether we would ever be able to make it to Lahore.

By this time, I had got some clue to the process: Papa is a 75 year old, retired High Court Judge. I argued that he could be safely given a visa. Also, being a senior citizen, he could take one escort with him. I pleaded along these lines and we got the visa in an hour. The first step was over. However, this was not the end but the beginning of the process.

Family Resistance

My family members were scared but I was adamant. Papa said that he was not willing to go. I put my foot down and declared that I would go alone because my visa did not stipulate that I could only travel with my father. He did not like the idea of my travelling alone so he decided to come with me.

Nowadays, bookings are easy due to the internet and I proceeded to make our travel arrangements. I preferred PIA to Air India, so that I would get the full taste of the experience.

The PIA Flight

While booking our tickets, I was asked all sorts of personal information like blood group, passport number, residential address etc. I was told that these details are needed for travel to Pakistan, which I had no problems furnishing.

We boarded the plane at 5.30 pm from Delhi to Lahore in January 2008. The boarding itself was normal. Inside the aircraft, the ambience was completely in accordance with Muslim culture. The condition of the aircraft was not as good as those from Air India but the host and fellow passengers were extremely courteous and polite. Our flight took off on time and soon reached the clouds. We were flying from Delhi to Lahore at 6.00 pm in January. The Sun played hide and seek exactly five times during the short flight and we enjoyed it. The time and altitude, combined with our direction, which was westward, made it an altogether unique experience. The view of the sunset, which is generally a short event, was available to us for almost ten minutes. It is an experience which cannot be expressed in words.

At Lahore Airport

Before commencing our journey, we had tried to get mobile roaming service for Pakistan but it proved to be a difficult task. However, when we landed at Lahore, our Indian mobiles still received faint signals due to our proximity with Amritsar. I managed to send an SMS to my home. Lahore airport is newly built and very good. I had made reservations at the Ambassador Hotel. They had sent a car for the complimentary pickup which we were able to trace due to the driver standing with a placard. Papa and I were rather scared of sitting in a closed car but we had opted for it. Ultimately, our fears were to prove baseless.

Sightseeing

We checked into the hotel. Our guide Shahid took us for a late evening round of the city. We were bemused to see similar streets as in India. The sight of Badshahi Mosque and Lahore Fort (Qila), resplendent in the evening illumination, were really memorable. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that people from all strata of society pray sitting next to each other, without any preferential treatment based on social status or donations. This is a departure from home, where we enjoy the privilege of “darshan” sooner by offering a “donation”.



Justice Krishna Narayan at Lahore Fort

We had dinner outside Gwalmandi in a nearby lane. This “food lane” has no parallel in the world. All dining is done in the lane itself. You can order food from any of the 25 shops lining the street and it will be served at your table, wherever you sit. They serve real delicacies.

Shahid who was less of a guide and more of a host asked me about the next day's program. Then we retired to bed in our neighbouring country. Our fear was diminishing.

Next day at 7 am both of us went for a stroll to a nearby area. Then we proceeded for buffet breakfast at 9 am. Upon entering the restaurant we noticed a different air. All the hotel staff members knew our country of origin. They were very keen to talk to us. During breakfast, all the waiters were very eager to serve us our meals at the table as though we were their guests of honour. The love and affection overwhelmed us.



(Our hosts at the Ambassador Hotel)

We got into our car to take us to the Jama Masjid. On the way, Shahid expressed his fears of the previous day. He had been as uncertain about our backgrounds as we were about his. He too had been scared initially. He revealed that in his career spanning 12 years, he was entertaining Indian guests for the first time. The same was also true about our driver. We soon became comfortable with one another and formed a friendly group.

I performed some magic tricks for the hotel staff. Each one of them was eager to talk to us. One waiter Shagul asked about my place of stay. When I said Mumbai, he narrated my profession as “film acting” to the others. They feel that only actors live in Mumbai. He had a desire to visit the Taj Mahal with his father.

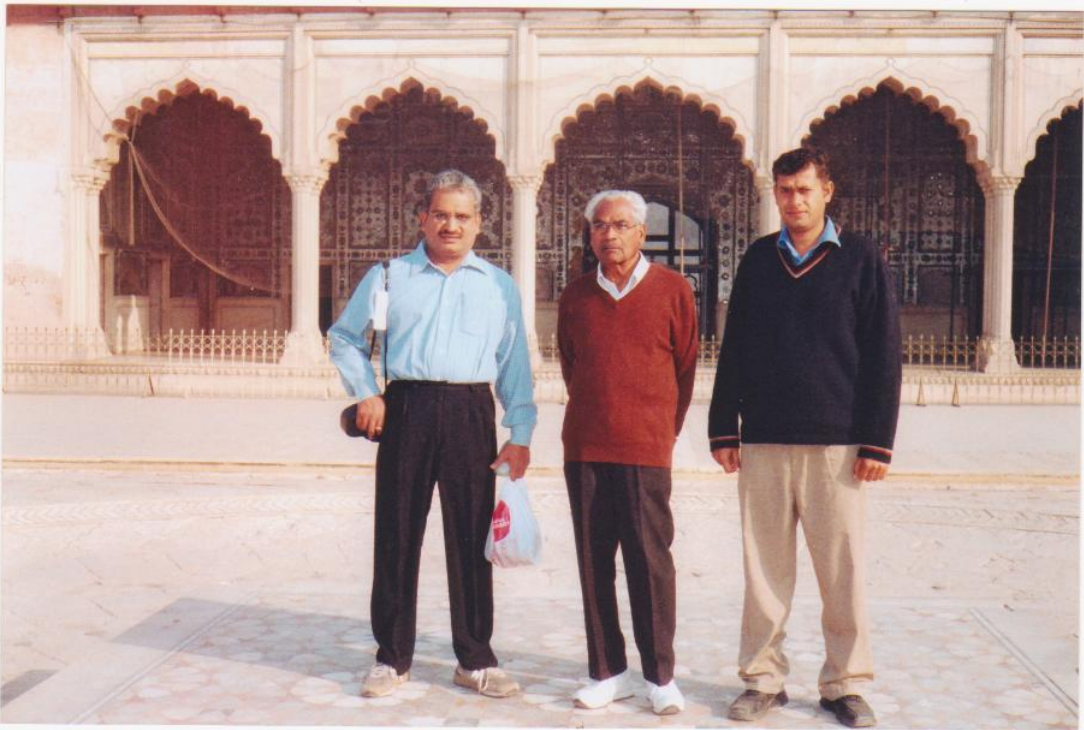
Papa wanted to see Anarkali Bazar. When the shopkeepers learned that we were Indians they offered a 50% flat discount with payment to be collected from the hotel, in addition to unlimited replacement or return of goods for cash – all this at FIXED PRICE shops with no exchange policy. Even as a marketing policy, it can only be said to be highly uncommon. We were touched by this gesture.

We went to Lahore High Court. I started talking to advocates. They had their own stories to narrate of the Pakistani judicial system. We wished to meet a High Court Judge. Unfortunately an advocate had passed away that morning and all the judges had left as the courts were closed.

We saw Minar-e-Pakistan. (Papa and Minar-e-Pakistan)



We saw Shalimar Gardens.



(Shalimar Gardens)

Shajahan's Bias for Lahore

Buildings in Lahore are better than their counterparts in India. The fountains are spacious and better designed. As we know, Akbar had consolidated his empire. Jehangir devoted time to art. Shajahan had his coffers full and to create employment, he constructed monuments and buildings. His contribution was not only in Delhi and Agra; the Shalimar Gardens of Lahore is also evidence of his love for development in his own way. Lahore enjoys a good climate and the weather was pleasant during our stay.

Harappa – What We Missed

Visas for Pakistan are issued on a city wise basis. We wanted to see Harappa but we did not have a visa for that area. The driver and guide suggested that we could still visit the place, since nobody asks for papers as in India. However, we were scared that if something went wrong, we would be arrested or shot as per their policy, a misplaced fear as I realised later. We did not venture out of Lahore.

Other Sites

We visited the Lahore railway station. The crowd did not seem very large, especially since I am accustomed to the ones at Dadar railway station in Mumbai. I wanted to take a few photographs of the station. However, permission was denied because we were Indians but by then I had clicked a few. It was all PR (Pakistan Railway) which is run along similar lines as IR (Indian Railway). Parking is a problem in Lahore also.



(Pakistan Railways)

We went to the Lahore Post Office to enquire about postal rates. I enquired about the rates to send a 50 gm envelope to Karachi. The enquiry clerk asked me all sorts of questions viz. the contents of envelope, whether delivery was needed by speed post etc. I became irritated but needed an answer. I proclaimed loudly that we were from Delhi and we did not want to post anything. We had just arrived a day earlier to see Lahore and on our way we were also visiting the Lahore Post Office. Wow! The scenario changed totally. The staff was spellbound. They were seeing two Indians face

to face for the first time. An elderly person came out. He apologised for the conduct of his subordinates, invited us inside and offered us a cup of tea. He narrated the story of the partition as told to him by his elders. Then he explained the entire postal system of Pakistan which is similar to that of our country. It is different in Dubai, where everyone has to get a post box address and collect or arrange to collect his/her mail whereas in India and Pakistan, mail is delivered to one's home.

We saw the Lahore museum. It had original seals from Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and was much better maintained than many of our museums. It had a Quran manuscript procured and preserved by Ranjit Singh for his Muslim subjects and many idols, including one of Lord Buddha lying in skin on bone starved health. Shahid informed us that Japan had offered to clear all loans in exchange for these pieces but the Pakistani Government declined the offer - what love for art, though it pertained to an idol forbidden by Islam. It reminded me of the changes in thought processes over time – Mahmud Ghaznavi is said to have refused his weight in gold to save the idol of Somnath, saying that he desired to be known as *Butshikan* (idol destroyer) and not as *Butfarosh* (idol vendor).



(Statue of Lord Buddha)

We also saw a movie. The condition of the theatre was bad. The photography of the film was worse. The movie lacked a story. Another problem we faced was that Punjabi

films are more difficult to understand for us than Urdu films. There were no Hindi films. The bilateral trade agreements between the two countries do not permit the screening of movies from across the border. We were told that pirated CDs were shown only in home videos.

Hindus in Lahore

We wanted to see a Hindu temple in Lahore. Shahid found one in a bungalow. I opened the front door and went inside, only to find nobody present. It was vacant except for some photographs of Gods and Goddesses hanging there. I proceeded to the first floor and then to the second floor when the priest called me. He informed me that there are 41 Hindu families in Lahore, with a total of nearly 111 members. The priest is from Varanasi. There is only one temple in Lahore. All the Hindu families assemble at the temple during each Hindu festival. The four members of the priest's family asserted that Hindus in Pakistan are safer than Muslims in India. They had not heard of any creed based untoward incident against any Hindu person during the past sixty years. We felt jealous at this religious amity that we so sorely lack in our country.



(A temple in Pakistan)

A Scary Moment ... (must read)

I have worked in theatre, films and TV serials. I was keen to watch live theatre. Lahore is a buzzing city. It sparkles at night. The markets are open till 9 pm or even later. The play officially starts at 11 pm and ends at 2 am. I preferred not to miss it, so I purchased 2 tickets. Then the real drama started.

Even I was scared at the thought of going back to the hotel at 2 am. In a notorious foreign country, could I afford to take the risk? However, it was a now or never event for me. By 7 pm papa suggested that we should sleep and forego the price of the tickets. I went to the reception counter of the hotel to better understand the local law and order situation. They confirmed that everything was fine but I was not convinced. I told the person manning the counter about a murder incident reported in the previous day's newspaper.

He gave a loud laugh. He said that the law and order situation is better in Lahore than in any city of India and that such stray incidents are blown out of proportion by the fourth estate to earn money. One last issue needed to be addressed – should we or should we not carry our passports when we visited the theatre? Carrying the originals would have meant additional responsibility but not carrying them was a violation. Finally, we decided to carry Xerox copies.

The venue was 2 km from our hotel. I feared that if the rickshaw driver took a wrong route at night, then we would be caught unawares. I suggested to papa to take an evening walk of 2 km at 10 pm from our hotel to the theatre just to acquaint myself better with the route.

We reached the theatre at 10.45 pm. At one gate “No admission” was mentioned. I deliberately peeped inside to learn more but was accosted by the security guard. Before he asked anything of us, I told him that we were from Delhi – father & son on a 3 day Lahore visit, leaving for our return journey on the following day. He had a big beard and was rather fierce looking and I was scared a little. However, he merely asked

whether we had purchased tickets. I said yes and slipped away to a safer place ten meters away.

We look into our surroundings. In the next five minutes a man (not gentlemanly looking) tapped my shoulder. “Are you from India?” he asked. It was 11 pm., cold and dark. We were alone. “Yes”, I said with false bravado and introduced my father to him. He asked, “How long are you in Lahore?” I said, “Two days and leaving the following day.” I was absolutely nervous. I regretted my decision to come to Pakistan and wished that I could reverse the clock. However, we do not control events, rather events control us.

He very politely said that his friends wished to see both of us and pointed his fingers towards four unknown faces. Dressed in long white kurtas, they were in the age group of 35-40 years and sported beards without moustaches. Though they looked polite I knew that looks could be deceiving. All blood drained from my face.

I had to choose between going with him and creating some excuse. I could not think of any excuse so Papa and I went towards the four persons. These were the most precarious moments of my life. I silently I apologised to my wife and mother in my mind for not listening to them.

It took me 5-10 seconds to reach the group of four. The leader asked me in pure Urdu.

“*Janab, Delhi se tashirf layen hein?*” (You have come from Delhi?)

“*Jee janab* – (“Yes Sir”)

“*Walid saheb saath mein hain?*” (Is your father with you?)

“*Jee janab*“(Yes Sir) I thought that I would be very thankful if he could let my father go.

“*Do din ho gaye aaye huye?*” (You have been here for two days?)

“*Jee janab*” “ – (Yes Sir)

“*Ticket liya hai?* – (Have you bought the ticket?)

“*Jee janab*”. (Yes Sir)

“*Kitna rupiyah diya?*” (How much have you paid?)

Jee, do hazaar rupaiya? (Sir, two thousand rupees)

“*Khana khaya?* (Did you have your dinner?)’

I felt that he was going to ask me for my last desire and offer some sumptuous food.

“*Jee khaya*”? (Yes Sir)

“*Chai to lenge*”? (Will you have tea?)

“*Jee meherbani – bus*” (Thank you so much)

I was trying to figure out whether I could run away from the scene and reach Amritsar – our nearest station. However, what he said next with his friends supporting his every word left papa and me spellbound.

“*Dr. Saxena! Mein is theatre ka malik hoon. Apne aaj ticket le liya – koi baat nahi. Agli bar aap jab bhi Lahore aayenge to aap ke sath kitne bhi log hon, sab mere mehman hein. Bus bande ko ek phone kar dijiaga. Aap hi nahin koi bhi Hindustani hamara pahala mehman hai. Jab tak aap Pakistan mein hain, apko kisi bhi kism ki taqlif ho to mujhe khabar kijiyege.*” (Dr. Saxena! I am the owner of this theatre. It is rather unfortunate that you have bought tickets today. Next time – whenever you are in Lahore – whoever you are with – all of you are my guests. Just give me a call. (he gave his mobile number). Not only you but any Indian is an honoured guest. So long as you are in Pakistan, whenever you feel the need for any assistance, just give me a call).” Papa and I had tears in our eyes. We were given sofa seats inside the theatre. We were surprised to hear an introductory announcement that this play was being especially performed for the owner’s two special guests from Delhi. After the show was over, he offered to get us dropped at the hotel. I wished that I could reciprocate in some way.

A journey is incomplete till I met the local newsman. *Nai* - barber used to be *khabarchi*, so I went for a haircut. The barber was going home but when I told him that I was an Indian, he reopened the shop. Throughout the haircut process, we exchanged anecdotes. He too was waiting to buy the Rs. 1 lac Indian Nano car. He told me about ‘Indian soaps’ and that they were very popular amongst Pakistani families. People fix get together events based on the timings of serials on Star TV and other channels. He confirmed the similar popularity of “*sas-bahu*” episodes in families, male-female friendships of hot young blood and their chatting for long hours during nights when there are no call charges between 12 am to 5 am.

When the haircut was over he announced with a sense of pride, "*Meina Hindustan ke kate hue ek-ek galat baal ko theek kar diya, ab aap shaan se apne mulk wapas ja sakte hein*". (I have rectified all mistakes of your haircut in India. You can go back to India with pride). He refused to accept a single rupee from me.

The journey was coming to an end. Partings are always painful and in such a short duration we had developed a close affinity with people about whom we have never used good words in general. It was quite an enlightening experience.

Liability of Partition

Every Pakistani holds himself personally liable to blame for the partition and wants to compensate for this loss through his personal conduct. I also know that 60 years after independence those actually responsible for the partition are far from alive.

We had one more day. In the morning, I deliberately took a wrong road and entered a women's college. When it was pointed out I retraced my steps and both of us moved ahead. On our way back after 20 minutes, one septuagenarian stopped us very politely, "*Janab kahan se tashrif laye hai?*" (From where you have arrived?) He was polite incarnate. I replied mischievously, "*Aap andaz lagayein*" (You guess). Uncle said, "*Aap yahan ke to nahi hai, Aap jab bees minute pahale idhar se nikal rahe thay tab maine bhatije se kaha ki aaj shahr mein mehman (witness his feelings) aayen hai.*" (You are not from Lahore. While you were passing through 20 minutes back, I told my nephew that today our city has guests). I still posed a question mark for him to guess our antecedents. He said Karachi but in a moment corrected it to India. I have an explanation for his initial guess of Karachi. He said that because he had never seen an Indian tourist in his lifespan of 60 years of partition. Tourism is not so popular in Pakistan even amongst their own citizens so not many people travel from Karachi to Lahore. Imagining somebody from India was unbelievable. When we introduced ourselves, he offered his house for our homely stay. He had a desire to see the Qutab Minar in Delhi before his death.

The reader will realise the importance of this story only after realising that he or any of his relatives/friends have probably never seen a Pakistani tourist. The same was true there. They had not seen an Indian tourist. Indians go there for business or meeting relatives.

The Border

A visit to Lahore is incomplete unless you visit the Atari Wagah border and watch the evening parade. We reached there at 4 pm. I was transported to a time 25 years ago, when I had witnessed the same from the Indian side.



(Way to Pakistan – India border)

Citizens from both sides shout patriotic slogans. We found patriotic fervour very much in existence. All were shouting “Pakistan Zindabad”. But the ceremony was interesting. After the flags were taken down, people on either side moved towards their respective border to wave off their neighbours. People from both sides were witness to the wind flowing from one country to another, stray dogs crossing the frontiers, birds flying with no restrictions and water flowing with no one to question them. My mobile network

coverage was in full strength at the border. I spoke over the phone as if it were a local call.

Yeh nadiya aur pawan ke jhonke,

Koi sarhad na inhe roke

No borders can stop the rivers and the wind (As also birds, stray dogs and mobile signals).

The Parting

Our departure for Delhi was on the next day. We had engaged a new taxi that could drop us at the airport. The driver was crazy. He mentioned three times that he knew routes for illegal entry into India. He had twice failed to get an Indian visa. He wanted to come with us to India. Jokes apart, most Pakistanis have only one desire and that is to visit India at least once. This is true about all the Pakistanis we met. I have travelled around the world. There are beautiful places and people all over the world but Pakistan is unbelievably like home. Papa and I will always remember the 72 hours that we spent with our neighbours.

Mr Shahid Malik, Pakistan High Commissioner

Upon our return, papa wrote a letter to the High Commissioner of Pakistan, Mr. Mohd. Shahid Malik. He invited us to visit him whenever we were in Delhi. Accordingly, we went to meet him at his Chanakyapuri Office. He apologised for the stigma of 26/11 and assured us that he and his Govt. are absolutely keen to end all types of terrorism. Soon after our meeting commenced, we became informal. Mr. Malik told us that a posting in India is considered prestigious in his service, in view of the various challenges involved. He enlightened me about the protocol issues of various ambassadors/high commissioners and informed me that their inter-se status is governed by the date of his/her presenting credentials to the President of India. This is as per the Geneva Convention. For functions hosted by the President or the Prime Minister of India, the High Commissioners sit beside the cabinet ministers of the Central Govt. He very graciously accompanied us out of his room to bid goodbye to us and even waited till our car moved off. What a magnificent host and a gem of a person! He

is from the Pakistan Foreign Service. He reiterated that his best friends and those who stood by him in his hour of need were from India. An hour passed before we realised it



(The author with the High Commissioner of Pakistan)