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May you have many more

A hundred beats

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Happy Birthday Pakistan. At 60 years old you're still a young lady, you have many years to go. You're not yet in the prime of your life, there's time for that still.

Growing up in a foreign country, I always felt Pakistani. Even though the language I heard everyday was not mine and the people I lived with were not technically like me, and despite the fact that Pakistan was a mythological land for me until the age of seven when I came home for the very first time, I was at heart a Pakistani. What does it mean to be Pakistani? Is it a question of values? Is it a question of religion or belonging? Or of opposition? As the fourteenth of August approaches and every near surface is covered in the flag, like clockwork we will be dutifully lectured on the precise qualities that make us Jinnah's children instead of Nehru's -- Islam, unity, the 1965 war, faith, the 1971 war, discipline, and all the rest. But for me, Pakistan is not the wars it has fought, the speeches of its founding father, or the shade of its passport. For me, Pakistan is something more visceral. It is the homeland of my soul and the point in time and space that my memory always returns to. It's a beat. Before you think me a bit drippy and swivel away to turn on PTV, let me explain.

Pakistan is the sound of the myna birds that nestle quietly in the trees all day and come alive at five in the morning. It's the smell of jasmines worn tightly around the wrist. It's the rush of hitting a six. It's the nuclear green, cardamom smelling Pakola drink.

Pakistan sports, in my heart and memory, not the modern day refugee camp look that construction companies and government bulldozers think is so in this season, but a simple elegance that is found in every crack on every sidewalk. It's the Islamia College in Peshawar, the electricity of flavour and noise of food street in Lahore, the Isfahan blue and yellow of Hyderabad, it's the art deco (Salman Rushdie calls it 'art dekho') of Karachi's older sprawls. It's a monument, this country, to difference and the variant hues of beauty.

But most of all, most certainly, Pakistan is the people. When I was in Chitral earlier this year, driving in the nearby town of Ayoun, my companions and I stopped by a local market to ask if they were selling mulberries. You can only find them around the North and as it was the season, we figured that someone somewhere must be selling mulberries or shatoot. One fruit seller pointed us to another who pointed us to another until finally someone understood the desperate importance of our shatoot quest. The man told us that if we carried up the road we would reach a place that had shatoot. We hungrily followed his directions and were confused when we landed

up outside a dead ended police thana. I'm no fan, I wasn't interested in pursuing this particular lead, but an uncle of mine got out of the car and went inside the station to ask for directions. He came out looking quite happy and waved me out of the car. The police officer in charge of the thana was with him. 'We have shatoot' he said pointing to an enormous tree in the compound 'come and have a glass of water while we bring some down for you'. And they did just that. They climbed the tree and shook down some fresh mulberries just because I had asked. I was a stranger in Ayoun, no one knew I was there or who I was. In Kubu Sayed Khan, in Sindh, still devastated by the monsoon floods and left unsheltered and uncared for, all the women I spoke to -- all of them with sick children and themselves dying of thirst -- asked me how I was and shook my hand, inquiring after my journey, before they answered my questions. One of them stretched her dupatta out to cover my head as well as hers from the midday sun. I do not know of a kinder people anywhere else in the world; if you claim to know otherwise, you're a stone cold liar.

This is undoubtedly my Pakistan and the Pakistan that makes me feel proud to belong. But there is another Pakistan, the one I encounter every day, and I am not proud of that one. On Friday on my way back from the airport, I didn't feel proud of Pakistan. Up till Sharah-e-Faisal the roads were thigh high with water and men and women waded through dirty rainwater to get to their places of work in the early morning hours. It's been raining since June. It has rained every summer of every year since 1947. How is it that people are still forced to brave pneumonia every time they leave their houses? And brave dysentery and cholera because their houses, shantytowns, are overcome by water? I'd been away for a week, blissfully out of contact with the world, and when I opened my newspapers once we had waded home I felt ashamed once again. Is this the Pakistan that Jinnah imagined? A Pakistan where we thank military dictators for not imposing emergencies, where self exiled and famously corrupt politicians hammer out power sharing deals amongst each other in the name of 'democracy'? I'm not proud of the Pakistan that is dictated to by Condoleezza Rice and her tag team at the White House, but I'm even less proud of the Pakistan that allows politicians such as those mentioned above to make a continual mockery of the people's suffering while they carry on shamelessly exploiting them. I'm not proud of the Pakistan that spends less than two per cent of its budget on education and I'm not proud of the Pakistan that with its bulldozers and extra judicial police powers treats life so cheaply. I'm not proud of the Pakistan where crimes against women are sanctioned by the constitution.

On this, our country's sixtieth year of independence, we must begin a process of healing this other Pakistan. The Pakistan in the newspapers and on the streets, the Pakistan for the millions of poor and disenfranchised of our country, must be critically examined and it must be rebuilt. It's not the Pakistan I want and it's not the Pakistan we deserve.