

The pink city

Sunday, February 03, 2008

'Asalam alaikum, Namaste, welcome to the Pink City' came the voice on the phone line. I had traveled to Jaipur, the heart of Rajasthan in India, to speak at a literary festival and after a long drive from Delhi I was met by a kind and welcoming voice.

I had gone to India to speak on Pakistan and to be a conduit for a message other than what we see reported on our country every day -- hate. I wanted to speak for what a majority of Pakistanis truly want, inside our borders and outside, peace.

Our countries, India and Pakistan, are sister nations. We are one half of each genetically and physically. We have, like siblings, more in common than we appreciate and our differences, though vast, are not impossible to overcome. They are barely visible.

In Pakistan, we greet brothers with a hand on the heart or a palm cupped towards to sky. 'Adab' we say, respect. Or salam, peace. In India, friends and strangers alike are met with two hands pressed together at the base of the heart. Namaste in Sanskrit, a joining of the fingers and skin, recognizes a counter divine. I bow to you it means.

The first time I visited India as an adult, I was with one of my best friends Sabeen. Sabeen is as close to a sister as I could get. We lost our fathers together and we became friends through a shared pain and burning desire to see justice in our lifetimes. It's fitting that we travelled to India two years ago. Sabeen is the ultimate Bollywood devotee. She is not afraid to admit it either. I'm wobbly on that front. I'm difficult and stubborn, Sabeen is temperate and forgiving. I'm veg, she's non-veg. You get my point here. It was in the passion of bargaining for some trinket or the other that Sabeen huffed at a merchant and said 'Come on bhai, we're from Pakistan'. I stared at her in horror. Why was she trying to get us maimed? I shot her angry eyes and clenched my face; surely she would realize that flouting our Pakistani-ness might not be the best way to endear us to our neighbours across the border. I was so wrong. The minute our nationality, our connection, had been revealed the shopkeeper fell over with friendship. He waived the price altogether. It was a small token, but it was as you do with siblings. 'Welcome' he said to us. 'I have family in Karachi' he said next.

There are plenty of tales just like this. When the 2005 earthquake ravaged much of our Northern regions, we were not the only ones to be hit; there were victims on the Indian side too. The Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy, whose founding members include Dr Mubashir Hasan, a pioneer and Pakistani treasure, and the brave civil rights activist and journalist Teesta Setalvad initiated joint relief. The Pakistan chapter sent relief aid to the Indian victims of the quake and the Indians sent relief to our devastated and destroyed. The forum is a joining of people's movements, of their aspirations and dreams for a peaceful future between our two countries. They have come together on resolutions ranging from demilitarization, Kashmir, and religious intolerance in both countries. Speaking in the early weeks of 2004, Dr Mubashir Hasan outlined fourteen steps for peace the forum advocated to Islamabad and New Delhi:

'Commit to partnership, equality and mutual respect'

'Commit to resolving political and other differences through peaceful and democratic means'

'Recognize the difficulty of modifying historical and public stances on the issue. Understand the imperative of finding and acceptable solutions...strive towards reconciliation and rapprochement'

There is no reconciliation without truth (that's a direct note to you venal supporters of the mercenary National Reconciliation Ordinance). And here it is -- there is more fortune in peace between our two countries than war will ever bring us. We must build bridges between our people, not bombs.

On the drive from Delhi to Jaipur, the only thing that broke the interminable voyage were fields of sarson, yellow buds alive with colour, just like we have in Lahore. Papaya plantations marked a patch of land between the green and yellow of the grassland. I thought of Sindh's mangoes. I have a sweet tooth myself. India's batsmen, Pakistan's bowlers -- can you think of a mightier team? Take that, West Indies.

I was accompanied on this most recent trip by another dear friend, Laleh -- you may remember her as the Indian who shopped quite liberally on a road trip through the interior of Sindh. I ate Rajasthani thali with Laleh and felt the insides of my head sear with heat from the pepper of the food. We travelled by taxi in the day and passed on one side the pink stucco bricks of Rajput palaces and on the other a crimson red communist flag, sickle and cell flapping in the wind at a traffic light. We didn't compete over our countries, playing the usual one-upmanship of nation states; instead we traded stories both familiar and unusual about our two homes. I told Laleh about Kot Diji, the fort we had missed on her last trip to Pakistan, and she told me about the Ajanta Alora Caves, the site we could visit on my next trip to her country.

In all journeys away from our loved ones we discover certain truths. I love Pakistan. I am proud to be a citizen of this country and to be counted among the millions who call this home. That is not my truth, that I've always known. On my last night in the pink city, I was watching television. The US Secretary of Defence was ready to send ground troops into Pakistan the headline blared. At that point, our differences became pointless. It was no longer us against each other; there were larger threats now. Siblings, though stymied by rivalries at times and shadowed by each other's ghosts, are still siblings. They have to protect each other in order to survive. We can't help our pasts, but we have an amazing opportunity to push for radical change in our futures.