

The frenemies within



BOOK REVIEW

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It is never easy to decode the many paradoxes that lie embedded in the India-Pakistan relationship that have never quite escaped from the perpetual oscillation between euphoria and despair. It is, therefore, a pleasure to read T C A Raghavan's tightly structured narrative, *The People Next Door*, tracing the endless twists and turns in India-Pakistan relations, avoiding monotony even as it clinically and cogently uncovers the inextricably bundled layers of intimacy and hostility. For this very reason one wishes that Mr Raghavan had not restrained himself from drawing "any grand les-

sons" or making "policy recommendations". Nevertheless, good diagnostics occasionally point in the right direction or at least mark those likely to lead to a dead-end, and for that we should appreciate the author's effort.

In his opening chapter, "The Setting of the Mould", Mr Raghavan sets his central thesis front and centre, that most trends and issues "which comprise the current India-Pakistan matrix" fell into place in the very first few years after Partition.

These included the consequences of the massive demographic movements across newly drawn borders, accompanied by horrific violence, the eruption of the war in Kashmir; the ambiguities which attended the incorporation of Junagadh and Hyderabad into India and that of the Baloch state of Kalat into Pakistan; and the controversies regarding the sharing of river waters, the treatment of minorities in either country and the division of assets. The bitterness and

sense of being wronged which they spawned in both countries have never quite subsided.

The author points out, "Over the years these responses have not changed but their intensity has abated with the passage of time. Nevertheless, during times of heightened tensions, all and each of these and other related events and developments between the summer of 1947 and the first quarter of 1950 resurface and old wounds and grievances acquire a fresh relevance."

In the following chapters, Mr Raghavan skillfully maps the trajectory of India-Pakistan relations, where periods of overweening hope are interspersed with phases of unremitting hostility. What emerges from this account is the reality that the historical narratives of the two countries are on such contrary tracks that any reconciliation becomes short-lived. They have different perspectives on why Partition took place, or what led to the war in Kashmir; each projects the war in 1965, the birth of Bangladesh or the later Kargil conflict in starkly different terms.

Intentions remain suspect even as

relations sometimes move in a positive direction. For example, the India side believes that the Simla Agreement of 1972 represented a joint understanding that all outstanding issues, including that of Jammu and Kashmir, would be resolved only through bilateral dialogue. Pakistan contests that. Indira Gandhi certainly believed that she had a solemn commitment from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that the Line of Control would become an international border once the dust settled down but this is vehemently rejected by Pakistan.

One lesson which I draw, therefore, from Mr Raghavan's account is that India-Pakistan relations can move ahead only in incremental steps, while symbolically dramatic gestures from either side generate acute anxiety. The fate of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's bus ride to Lahore in 1999 and the Kargil conflict which followed is one instance. The latest is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unexpected dash to Lahore followed by Pathankot and Uri terrorist incidents, which do not figure in the book though the author was India's high commissioner

in Pakistan at the time.

There is another important lesson that emerges from the history of India-Pakistan relations. In the chapter on "Working Together," Mr Raghavan points to the curious fact that throughout the most difficult days in the aftermath of partition, the Kashmir war and several other crises, "political and diplomatic contacts continued" with both sides seeming to agree "that no matter how important or divisive the issue of the day may be, no single aspect should so dominate relations that everything else became subject to its satisfactory conclusion." This points to the importance of sustained engagement precisely because of and when relations are difficult and fraught.

If this history appears somewhat depressing the book provides some interesting and often counter-factual anecdotes which reflect the quirky nature of India-Pakistan relations and bring a welcome dose of humour to this history. Mr Raghavan points out how much the partition of India was "the partition of the Muslim community of undivided India". For many of this community the appeal

of secular and plural India remained a powerful sentiment. There follows the story related by M J Akbar, now minister in Modi's government, on how his father first went to Pakistan but the returned to India barely a year later. Asked why, he reportedly said, "There are too many Muslims in Pakistan."

A particularly amusing incident narrated in the book involves Giani Zail Singh's earthy comment on President Zia-ul-Haq's protestations of seeking peace with India: "*Akh bhi maare, yaay gunghat bhi kaddae*" (She cannot wink provocatively and cover her face at the same time).

Many in India would agree!

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary and currently senior fellow, CPR

THE PEOPLE NEXT DOOR The Curious History of India's Relations with Pakistan

T C A Raghavan
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