

Thanks to Smugglers

Bollywood Films As Bridge Builders Among Indo-Pak People

○ Madhu Kishwar

In the last few weeks much has been said and written in praise of Vajpayee's dramatic and commendable peace initiative toward Pakistan. Many are puzzled at the sudden turn of events because for decades the governments of both Pakistan and India did everything within their powers to keep the unhappy memories of the 1947 partition alive. The *sarkari* propaganda machinery in both nations have tried to instill unthinking fear, hostility and hatred for people on the other side of the border. The rulers in each country have cynically manipulated people's emotions and anxieties for their own selfish electoral purposes. They have deliberately generated hysteria and appropriated a lot more power for themselves in the name of protecting national interests against enemies across the border.

Despite the enormous amount of effort and resources they have wasted to promote hatred between the two governments, their success with their peoples has been rather minimal. Five decades after the tragic Partition, the people of both countries seem to have compelled their leaders into understanding that they are not willing to be manipulated much longer. The following incident reflects this popular perception of a fairly large spectrum of people on both sides of the border.

In November 1998, I visited Peshawar as a member of the Indian delegation to the fourth conference of the Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy. At a dinner reception hosted by the Peshawar Chamber of Commerce, one of their key office bearers began his speech with the following joke: An Indian and a Pakistani met each other at some international airport and at once struck up a friendship. The Indian described to the Pakistani how much the Indians relished things Pakistani, including their singers and *shayars*; how people who migrated from Pakistan in 1947 were still nostalgic about their Muslim neighbours and friends. The Pakistani went into ecstasies describing how much the Pakistanis loved Indian films and Bollywood stars, how hungry they were for consumer goods

from India and how excited they got whenever group of Indians came to visit Pakistan.

Their mutual statements of admiration continued until one of them asked in genuine puzzlement: 'Tell me—if all this is true, why then are we considered enemy nations?' The other wholeheartedly agreed that this was indeed a paradox. After they had both racked their brains for a while to find an answer to this puzzle, the Pakistani suddenly said: 'I think I know. It is all the fault of politicians. They promote wars and bloodshed to keep the people of both countries frightened of each other so they can play the old divide and rule game.' "Is that so?" The Indian replied. "In which case we should declare them as criminals" "Oh no! The problem is more serious than that" the Pakistani quipped: "Criminals take your money and run. But politicians run and keep taking your money."

The force of popular opinion in both countries is compelling the political leaders to behave with greater responsibility because they require voter endorsement to stay in power. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats, with their secure jobs, are immune to popular pressure. So far, they have been the biggest stumbling blocks to arriving at a sensible solution to the conflicts between the two countries. The future of

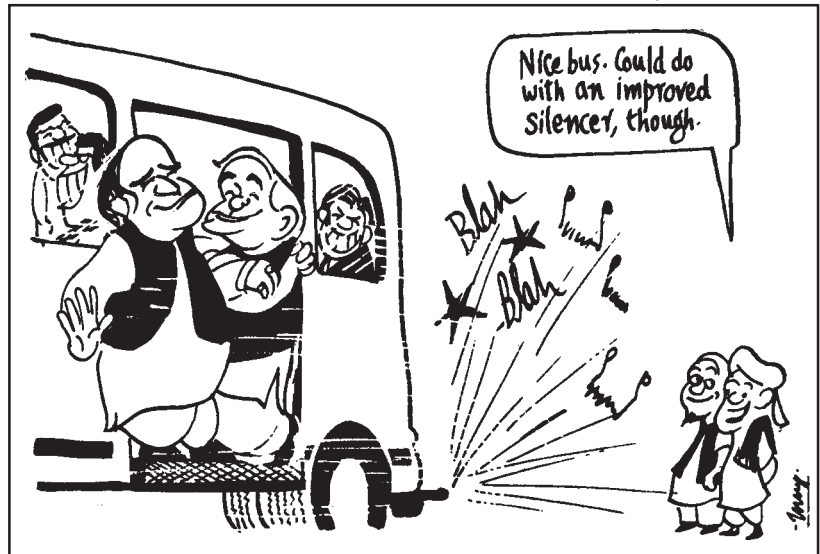


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this peace process will, therefore, depend on whether or not the political leaders have the courage to keep the initiative in their own hands or continue to let the *babus* determine policy.

Any one of us who travels abroad cannot escape becoming aware of how unwelcome Indians are virtually everywhere. People are either altogether ignorant about or indifferent to India, or they have deep prejudices about us as a people. Except in Pakistan. The warmth with which Indians are treated by ordinary Pakistanis—waiters, taxi-drivers, bus conductors, shopkeepers—takes most Indians by surprise. We are taught by our government to mistrust all visiting Pakistanis as potential spies, ISI agents, and possible saboteurs. Therefore, one expects to be mistrusted in Pakistan. However, the reality is altogether different. Despite all the hurdles put in the way of free movement by the governments on both sides, of all the countries in the world it is only in Pakistan that an Indian, especially from the north, can easily forget that he or she is in a “foreign” country, let alone in an “enemy nation.”

This was my fourth visit to Pakistan, the first three being brief visits to Lahore. This trip most of my time was spent in and around Peshawar. Most of the Indian delegates were in tears at the warmth of the hospitality we experienced. For me, the most moving experience was meeting with Balquees Azam Khan, who had studied in the same school as my mother and was a friend of one of my aunts. My mother remembered her because she was an exceptionally beautiful girl and came from one of the leading Pathan families of Peshawar. I walked into Balquees Bibi's house



at Mall Road unannounced, and without any prior appointment. Yet, I was received with such warmth and felt so much at home that when I decided to stay on a few extra days after the conference, I didn't hesitate in asking her if I could stay with her. Many others of our team also struck up friendships with Pakistani delegates and were offered equally warm hospitality. Balquees Bibi, the wife of a retired senior civil servant Mir Azam Khan, looks forward to her trips to India with great enthusiasm. Once she even led a delegation of women to India from the Ladies Club of Peshawar. She took me to the school and college where she and my mother had studied. A good part of this couple's conversation revolved around the theme of how the Partition could have been averted but for this or that lapse of Congress political leaders. I must confess that the Pakistani version of our leader's lapses doesn't always match with ours. But what became clear from a series of such interactions is that religion is not at all the dividing factor. It is how we relate to various political leaders, how

we interpret the role of Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, Patel, Badshah Khan and a host of others that is the basis of our political divide.

Through Balquees Bibi I also met another remarkable woman, Nahid Wisal Khan and her two daughters. Nahid Apa is also an active member of the Peshawar Ladies Group. She told me of how hard she had tried to convince the hosts and organisers of the Pakistan-India Conference in Peshawar to let their Ladies Group host all the women delegates coming from India, and how disappointed she was when her request was turned down. As soon as she heard from Balquees Bibi that I was staying with their family and wanted to see rural areas around Peshawar and visit Badshah Khan's family, she left all her engagements and took me and another male delegate for a day long trip to all the places we wanted to visit. This despite the fact that as someone recently widowed she was somewhat nervous at being seen in the company of an unrelated man, as this could well be misunderstood in her village. We were feasted lavishly and lovingly wherever we

went—whether it was the house of Wali Khan (Ghaffar Khan's son) or that of the landless poor family who work on Nahid Apa's agricultural farm land. It did not feel to Nahid or to me that we were total strangers to each other.

Not that one didn't get a taste of politically nurtured prejudices. Just to cite one typical example, while visiting a famous shrine of a medieval sufi near Lahore, I tried finding out from various devotees at the shrine what was the legend associated with that particular sufi sant. Most people could think of nothing more than, "He was a very *pahuncha hua shakhs* (highly evolved man). He can fulfil any and every *murad* (wish) of his devotees." I kept pressing for specific details of the miraculous power people claimed for him. Almost every one I asked gave very vague answers to this except one woman from a visibly working class type of family. She said this particular saint was revered because he protected Pakistan from the evil designs and aggressions by India. How did he do that? I asked. Her response spoke volumes about the fearful image of India projected by the Pakistani establishment:

"During each and every war that India has launched against Pakistan, Indian troops try to either capture or bomb out Lahore as a strategic start. However, all the bombs thrown by Indian planes are caught mid-air by this sufi sant who then hurls them into the river Ravi thus rendering the attack ineffective." She attributed the reduced water in river Ravi to all the fire balls it had to swallow. This also perhaps indicates that Pakistanis don't trust the Pakispani army, with its corruption tainted image, to stand up to the supposed might of the Indian army.

For all the interest and enthusiasm Pakistanis have for India, they are even more paranoid than Indians about being swallowed up by Indians—politically and culturally. This fear is especially pronounced among the educated elite, many of whom feel the Pakistani state would simply collapse if the two countries allowed free travel and trade between them. By contrast, the Indian elite is culturally far more self assured. Their fears mostly centre around the Pakistani governments' ability to subvert and sabotage Indian security through cross border terrorism and support to secessionist movements.

These politically inculcated fears notwithstanding, it was amazing to see how well-informed most Pakistanis are about India. Thanks to satellite television, Indian news channels are easily accessible even in the frontier provinces. While Doordarshan's credibility is almost as low as that of state-owned Pak Television, the new independent channels from India are avidly watched and taken seriously. Both Balquees Bib and Nahid Apa had much

more knowledge than me about Indian television programmes. During her visit to Delhi, Nahid's daughter, Anoosh had refused to join her mother for society parties and instead preferred visits to Delhi University meeting Indian professors whose academic work she had read and admired. One of her fond dreams is to come for further studies to India. Another young woman I met told me how during her trip to Delhi she had actually gone into a temple to perform a puja. She was thrilled that the pujari was not able to guess that she was a Pakistani Muslim because of her close familiarity with Hindu rituals thanks to her regular exposure to Hindi films.

There is not a Pakistani I met who did not express a keen desire to visit India—from shopkeepers to bus drivers to police constables, and even politicians. Many I met casually even pleaded with me to help them get a visa to at least visit Bombay and Delhi. This included the two intelligence men who escorted a group of us on shopping trips. We would do well to recognise that while Pakistanis often migrate to Dubai, the Emirates, London or Malaysia for economic reasons, they do not share an emotional, cultural bond with these societies, of the kind they have with India. It defies all politically cultivated prejudices. For example, my Pakistani friends tell me that when Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* was being telecast over Doordarshan people sat glued to their TV sets on Sunday mornings in all those cities and towns that could receive this teleserial.

India and Pakistan have put numerous foolish restrictions on travel, trade and cultural exchange. But even before the

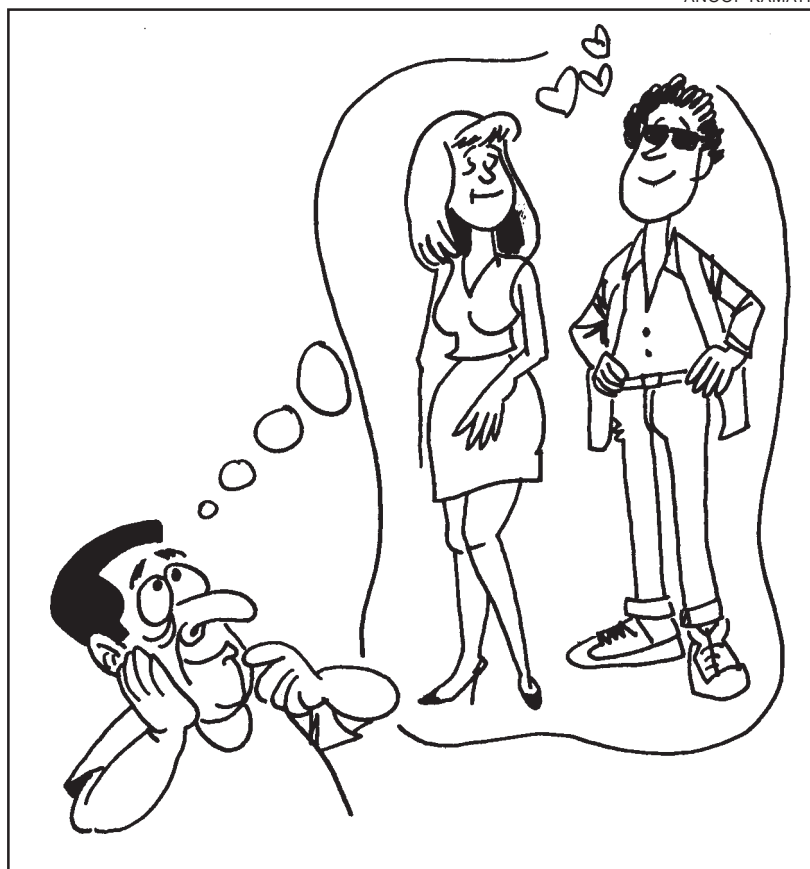


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advent of satellite television channels, the smugglers on both sides defied the numerous restrictions imposed by politicians and bureaucrats and created new bonds between Pakistanis and Indians. India has been a much greater beneficiary of these illegal operations because of the Pakistani fascination for Bombay films. The Pakistani hunger for products of Bollywood far exceeds the Indian hunger for consumer goods imported from the West or Hollywood films.

Thus the emotional bonding between the people of the two countries despite decades of hate propaganda by the two governments has been facilitated by the efforts of a much-maligned group of people branded as smugglers. The word invariably evokes images of the criminal underworld, of people who inhabit a realm of evil and vice. But each of my visits to Pakistan has made me realise how valuable a service to our society is being performed by this despised and much maligned group of people. If we had a mature political system, they would simply be called traders and entrepreneurs.

My recent visits to Lahore and Peshawar in Pakistan over the last three years have also compelled me to take our Bollywood films far more seriously than I tended to do. We are forever decrying the vulgarity and crudity of Mumbai films, the negative stereotypes about women they project. Viewed through the eyes of Pakistanis, our films appear to play an altogether different role than we attribute to them in India. I first became aware of the hold of Bollywood films on the Pakistani imagination through the all pervasive presence of Indian



film songs. We heard only Hindi film music everywhere we went—in the homes we visited, the buses or taxis we travelled in—even in the vehicles of the police intelligence officials who were expected to keep a watch on us as well as provide security. Ninety per cent of music cassettes sold in Pakistan owe their origin to India.

Similarly, go to any video parlour, be it in Lahore or in the far away Frontier Provinces. The vast majority of VHS cassettes on sale or rented are of Bollywood *masala* films. Posters of our film stars—from Madhubala to Madhuri Dixit and from Rajesh Khanna to Salman Khan—are displayed prominently in these shops as well as in the homes of both the educated elite and the *aam janata*.

I asked several of my Pakistani acquaintances and friends the

reason for this obsession. What do our films represent when viewed through the eyes of Pakistanis?

- A much freer atmosphere of gender mixing—young men and women are routinely depicted wooing each other, having fun, dancing, singing, partying, laughing, teasing and playing pranks. Defying parental authority is projected as a virtue and self choice in matters of love and marriage shown as a basic individual right. The reason our films carry much greater appeal than Hollywood romantic *masalas* is that in Bollywood films this conflict between young and old does not lead to permanent estrangement between parents and children. Nor does it lead to breakdown of the family. Our cinema is obsessed with

resolving the inter-generational conflict in a way that leads to greater understanding and harmony in the larger family rather than a breakdown or nuclearisation of it. Young people are encouraged to revolt against parental tyranny but not disown responsibility for the care and respect of their parents and other elders.

● Indian women as projected in our cinema appear very versatile and colourful. I heard this repeatedly from taxi-drivers, waiters and others: Indian women are really *dildaar* and *rangeen* (romantic and colourful): one minute they are romping around in a bikini or a mini skirt, in another minute they transform themselves into seductive *apsaras* of traditional Indian mythology. An equally smooth transition to *Sati-Savitri pativrata* (total loyalty to one's husband) often follows. They move from disco song and dance to bhajans with amazing ease—just as the *pativratas* take no time in transforming themselves into ferocious Durgas and Chandis.

Similarly, they can easily move from the role of pampered daughters to happily adjusted *bahus* (daughters-in-law) able to win over the hearts of the entire *kunba* (clan). They observe no purdah, they intermix freely with the opposite sex but remain steadfast in their loyalty to their chosen mate. Their freedom is, therefore, something even conservative men can rejoice in for it doesn't threaten to destroy the family—just make it more fun. Our film heroines have indeed captured the hearts of Pakistani men and built a powerful emotional bond with India. The popular Pakistani chant "*Madhuri de do, Kashmir le lo*" (give us

Madhuri Dixit, you can take all of Kashmir in exchange) tells us a great deal about the powerful fascination exercised by our filmi *Bharatiya Nari* among people who yearn for freedom without wholesale westernisation.

● Another great appeal of the Bollywood films lies in its iconoclasm and defiant mood even while it is careful to emphasise the need for respecting cultural traditions. Many Pakistanis told me they were fascinated by the freedom with which Hindus poke fun at their gods, quarrel with their favourite deities, and provoke the gods to prove their worth to their devotees by actually coming to the aid of good over evil. In a culture in which Allah is projected by power wielders as someone mainly to be held in total awe and feared, where Islam or the Quran cannot be criticised openly from public platforms, let alone through films, the ease with which Hindu gods and goddesses are openly depicted allowing liberties to their devotees is indeed attractive. Pakistanis are superb at expressing their iconoclasm through popular jokes. But that exercise by its very nature is anonymous and confined to the private domain.

● Though Pakistan outshines even India in corruption, their films and TV programmes are not allowed to voice open criticism against political corruption as Indian films do in detail. I found a great deal of envy and admiration for the much greater space for dissent and freedom available in India.

Because of the presence of a large Muslim population in India with secularism as the avowed state policy, our film industry as well as our commercial television

networks tend to portray Hindu-Muslim relations in a positive, romanticised way. Films like *Deewar*, *Mirch Masala* and *Amar Akbar Anthony* invariably show Hindu-Muslim friendship in a very positive light. Films like *Bombay* dealing with communal violence go out of their way to communicate that the clashes are instigated by politicians and are not the products of religious hatred. Even where prejudices exist, they are meant to be overcome and not allowed to come in the way of true love. However, Pakistani films and TV programmes tend to be hate soaked in projecting Hindu characters because Hindus in their mind are synonymous with Indians—that is people from an enemy nation. They mostly appear as caricatures just as in Indian films a "Pakistani agent" would be projected as a crude stereotype—but not so Indian Muslims because they cannot be projected as the hostile "other".

Therefore, when Pakistanis watch our *masala* films, their sensibilities are seldom offended as they are when they listen to our Doordarshan news bulletins or when Indians watch *sarkari* propaganda on Pakistan Television (PTV). All of these ingredients put together in Bollywood films paint a very flattering picture of India as a far freer society than what prevails in Pakistan. This provides Pakistanis an effective counter-view to the anti-India propaganda being routinely indulged in by their government and religious leaders. Therefore, when they hear of Hindu-Muslim riots in some part of India or an event like the demolition of Babri Masjid, their response is not just of anger but also of disappointment. The

underlying message is: “We expected better of you. Why are you coming down to our level? You are supposed to be a liberal, secular democracy.”

Unfortunately, Indians have very few comparable sources of information about Pakistan and the evolving mind-set of its people other than what come to us through official media. PTV is far worse than our *sarkari* television in promoting anti-India hysteria and, therefore, has failed to act as a bridge of communication.

The Pakistani television serials acquired quite an appeal among educated middle class audiences for some years during the 1980s and even the early 1990s because they were far superior to the dull and drab melodramas telecast by DD. But they were too upper class oriented to reach the hearts of the masses in India. Now, with the advent of diverse channels in India, the Pakistani serials seem to have lost their charm. However, even while they were the rage among select urban groups in north India, they performed a far more limited role. They showed that the Pakistani educated elite groups are not very different in their value system, dilemmas and problems than their counterparts in India. These cultural similarities remain deep despite the political hostility.

However, PTV serials did not stimulate the Indian middle class imagination because they did not promise a world of greater freedom, colour and fun along with space for dissent, for protest, for challenging and overthrowing, even though merely in fantasy, social and political tyrants, for defeating sarkari thugs and looters in open combat.

It is a pity that for all these decades our paranoid rulers were unable to see how much India gains by allowing for a free flow of people, books, films, music, and goods. Our politicians and our career diplomats and bureaucrats have been a big hindrance in working out peaceful relations between the two neighbours. But our film industry and the adventurous people who, though more for pecuniary reasons than altruism, defy foolishly imposed state restrictions on trade and manage to smuggle to Pakistan books as well as cassettes of all our films and songs, have inadvertently done a brave job of breaking down artificially created

barriers between the two peoples and helped generate a strong sentiment across the hostile border in favour of peace, free interaction and friendship between the peoples of the two countries.

So far our politicians imagined they would gain political mileage by fanning hatred and hostility between the two countries. The recent thaw that the Sharif-Vajpayee bus diplomacy has caused in Indo-Pak relations is an inspiring example of ordinary people guiding their so-called leaders into pursuing more sane policies and rejecting the politics of hatred and divisions. □

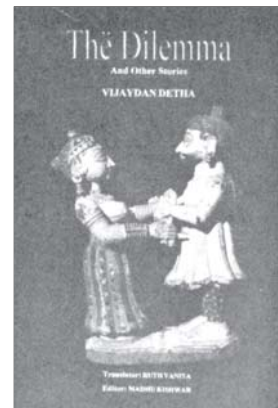
The Dilemma

and Other Stories

By Vijaydan Detha

Translator: Ruth Vanita

Editor: Madhu Kishwar



Vijaydan Detha's stories provide a scintillating glimpse of the rich repertoire of folk tales of Rajasthan—stories in which women challenge and subvert male defined institutions and norms without losing their dignity and femininity. This collection stands out for affirming the joy of living as well as for its vision of more egalitarian and mutually satisfying man-woman relationships.

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