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TNS

Bombay, personally

Beena Sarwar

“Pakistan?” The young woman behind the cell phone shop counter in downtown Bombay appears taken aback on learning where I’m from, then glances about to see who else is listening. Apparently I’m the first Pakistani she has ever met. And I look just like anyone from her own country.

Her name tag pronounces that she is Naseem, and she tells me that actually, her mother is from Quetta. “I wish I could see it!” she says. “I wonder what the currency looks like…” I fumble in my bag, find an almost-new ten rupee note for her - she holds it up, studies it, and excitedly shows it to her colleagues, who gather around interestedly. As she starts to give it back, I shake my head, “You can keep it.” Seeing her hesitation, I add, “It’s a present from Pakistan, you can show it to your mother.”

“No, how can I? I have nothing to give you….wait!” She turns and goes to a locker, and offers me an Indian note in exchange. “I’ve kept this for a long time, the serial number has a special meaning for me. Please, you take it,” she says. It’s a crisp ten-rupee Indian note. “The serial number starts with “786, the Islamic holy numbers because they stand for ‘Bismillah’,” I explain to my friend, fellow journalist Kalpana Sharma who is looking on bemusedly.

Distractions over, we complete the cell phone transaction, and I have a local cell number for just over four hundred (Indian) rupees, including tax, SIM card and Rs 150 worth of talk time.

Across town, young Arif Pervez and another Pakistani friend are going through a similar experience, but without an Indian host to provide the photo-ID and local address. “When they saw my Pakistani passport they didn’t know quite what to do. They kept saying, ‘No problem, we’ll just get it for you sir,’ but there were a lot of phone consultations and surreptitious looks -- and reassuring smiles -- before we got it.” The fact that he got it, says a lot for the improving relations between the two countries.

Why are the visiting Pakistanis so keen to have local cell phones? For one thing, it’s useful at an event like the World Social Forum where some 100,000 other human beings are milling about. For another, many people like to be connected, but leaving aside the high roaming charges of our parent companies, India and Pakistan are probably the only two neighbouring countries in the world where you cross the border and the roaming stops. Indian and Pakistani cell phones can’t even talk to or text-message each other from

their respective countries… If this is not on the agenda in the forthcoming talks, it should be.

Back to Naseem and currency notes… Another journalist friend from Delhi, Bharat Bhushan, has an interesting story from his last visit to Karachi, when a taxi driver he sat with talked nostalgically about the ferry that used to ply Karachi-Bombay route. "It cost Rs 16, and no one asked if you had Indian or Pakistani rupees," he says. Hard to believe today, when we can't even change Pakistani currency into Indian or vice versa – we have to use US dollars, British pounds or Euros.

Naseem's initial shock followed by a warm response is typical of what Pakistanis visiting India encounter today. Many such responses come from the migrants who had have come to live here looking for work – just like Karachi. Others are visiting for the World Social Forum, where Indian participants often asked the Pakistani delegates for their contact numbers and even 'autographs'.

'Stage Brecht' at WSF is packed for Habib Tanvir's 'Pongal Pandit' which pokes unabashed fun at pomposity and religious self-righteousness – the ageing but still spirited Tanvir has been physically attacked for this play, even though, as he stresses it is not 'his' but a 1935 play he has revived with local, unlettered actors. Next to me, chuckling loudly at the play, is Ganesh Prasad from a village in Madhya Pradesh. Between scenes, he writes his address down for me and says, "Please, some time, write to me from Pakistan." Others seated nearby join in. "Pakistan? Where from in Pakistan?" The man next to Ganesh has an uncle living in Korangi, Karachi.

A young factory worker from UP is perhaps typical of the hundreds of ordinary people out for a recreational stroll at Azad Maidan (from where Gandhi launched the resistance) only to find the WSF closing plenary under way: "Ma'am, where are you from, Pakistan? Can I have your sign please?"

Now strangers, we were once one, divided by an open border soon separation; permits were gradually introduced and then finally the passport system and visa restrictions that now keep us so much apart that that coming across an Indian or Pakistani in the other country is almost a shock. But so great is the yearning and the desire to meet – perhaps now more so, as a realization seeps into both national consciousness that peace is the only way forward for us - that when you do come into contact with each other, there is more often than not, this spontaneous warmth and welcoming, and of course curiosity.

At least, that is what one found in Bombay – or Mumbai, as the Shiv Sena government re-named it in 1996. Locals use the names interchangeably, although many persist with the old 'Bombay' as an assertion of its multi-cultural, rather than Marathi, identity. It reminds one so much of Karachi – it has the same commercial pull, the same sea laps its shores. *"Mumbai is the finance capital of the nation, the industrial hub of everything from textiles to petrochemicals, and it's responsible for half the country's foreign trade. But while it has aspirations to become another Singapore, it's also a magnet to the rural*

poor. It's these new migrants who are continually re-shaping the city in their own image, making sure Mumbai keeps one foot in its hinterland and the other in the global market," says *The Lonely Plant Guide* to India – they might have been talking about Karachi…

"Karachi is just like Bombay was 20, maybe 30 years ago," comments the filmmaker Anand Patwardhan as we taxi our way across town, from the incredibly crowded Dadar area where he lives to meet friends for dinner at a more uptown area. If that's true, Karachi's city government would do well to study Bombay's problems and preempt some of them. A lot of positive steps have been taken in the older areas of the city, where historic old buildings have been cleaned up, entire localities preserved, and roads fixed. The more secular minded Bombayites or Mumbaiyas, grumble at how roads and buildings have been renamed after 'Chatrapati' Shivaji, the Marathi king, but most people still use the old names.

Kalpana's driver Shashi is Marathi, but he doesn't like the Shiv Sena or any of the other Hindutva types. "They just create trouble," he grumbles as we navigate the coastal road past the famous Haji Ali mosque at the end of a long causeway that places the mosque in the middle of the Arabian Sea. The same sea that laps the shores of Pakistan…

Behind us, huge hoardings of Bal Thakeray are being put up to celebrate the Shiv Sena leader's birthday. Shashi, who lives in a 700-room 'chawl' (tenement) in south Bombay, doesn't have much time for such politicians. "Look at how much they spend on these things," he grumbles, adding, "He's a *mahabadmash*, only creates *laphars*. These politicians only foment hatred.

Shashi is proud that his own locality with its 5000 voters has never seen a communal clash. Their 'dada' or community head is a Nepali Gharwali, who has held that position for the last 25 years. "He never thinks of his own religion or caste when it comes to the community. He puts the interests of the people first. And we have all religions and castes living there, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, everyone lives together." Obviously, leadership matters.

Despite the sceptre of communal riots that has haunted India particularly since the Ayodhya mosque was razed, Bombay has on the whole remained peaceful, even through the next round of carnage, Gujarat. Muslim names are openly displayed at sweetmeat or garments shops, and most of the riksha or taxi drivers one encounters seem to be Muslim. But the spirit of reconciliation and the desire for friendship appeared strong in most of the ordinary people – shopkeepers, taxi or riksha drivers, commuters – whom the visiting Pakistanis encountered, regardless of religion or caste, with perhaps a few exceptions.

"It seems that the city has decided that it wants no part of this communalism after the last horrific lapse at the time of the the Ayodhya riots," says Kalpana. "It's too much of a strain on business." Karachi re-visited.

We come across people, mostly young men, lining up for the opening of a photographic exhibition of Marathi forts by Bal Thakaray's son at the famous Jehangir Art Gallery in the picturesque downtown area.

"Always a communal angle," says a young artist friend of Kalpana's we run into, referring to the Shiv Sena's idealizing of the Marathi rulers who resisted the Mughals. The politics of identity, ethnicity, religion, nationality still have a pull. But more and more people seem to be realizing that it is the politics of humanity which will prevail if humanity is to survive.

Upstairs, the Gallery Chemould is exhibiting a thought-provoking show called 'Cities, Countries and Borders' -- wood-cut prints by the New York based artist Zarina Hashmi, who has friends and relatives in India and Pakistan.

"The line is just in everyone's head," says Zarina Hashmi, who will be exhibiting in Karachi and Lahore this month. She is talking about the print titled 'Dividing Line' that evokes the line between India and Pakistan. "Our generation has come to peace with it a long time ago. So if India and Pakistan are holding peace talks now, I'm glad. I just wish they had done it earlier" (*The Indian Express*, Jan 14, 04).

Shireen Gandhi, who runs Chemould, is keen on joint art exhibitions and projects between Indian and Pakistani artists. She is already in touch with several about such possibilities.

Haresh Shah, a member of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, wants Pakistani designers to style his textiles, and work out a value-added deal for both the Indians and the Pakistanis. "We can work out a special quota for each other," he says. "We could even work out barter deals, and pool our resources to fight our common problems, like poverty, illiteracy, battered women, or whatever."

This is the spirit one encountered more than any other, during that all-too brief visit to what seems to be Karachi's vibrant, charismatic, long-lost twin.

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