

The Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif and the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi met earlier this week seeking good relations. How does the Pakistani society view India? **RAJENDRA K. ANEJA** reports.

Pakistan

A voyage of discovery



Faisal Mosque

The tall man strode into the hall dressed in a simple white "salwaar-kameez", a pair of traditional Peshawari shoes ("khedis") and a black jacket. The packed hall of about 900 people exploded into thunderous cheers and a standing ovation. Young boys and girls jumped up with excitement, thumped their tables and filled the air with whistles. The welcome befitted a rock star.

The man in white moved to the stage and commenced speaking. He spoke clearly, simply and in elegant Urdu; every member of the audience could understand him. His thoughts were crystal clear - he stood for a multi-cultural and secular framework, believed in a corruption free society, condemned the attacks on minorities and their places of worship, had faith in the young and rapid economic development. Each proclamation drew acclaim from the audience.

Clearly the speaker was the darling of the youth of Pakistan. Seeing the stunned disbelief on my face, a Pakistani manager remarked, "For us, he is your Sachin Tendulkar, Virat Kohli and Amitabh Bachchan, all rolled into one!" True. Mr. Imran Khan the former captain of the Pakistan cricket team and now an important leader of the opposition, was generating mass adulation, bordering on hysteria. He represented hope and peace.

"Why should we vote for you next time, when we Hindus are facing problems? Our temples are being attacked in Larkana," asked a young student Raj Gujar. "The attacks should be condemned," responded Imran. I was taken

aback that a youngster would dare to ask a sensitive question publicly; I was even more surprised to see Imran respond with a straight bat.

With his rugged, Pathani features, brilliant declamation skills and shining sincerity, Imran could have cemented a place in the movies; but he bravely chose a road not taken, secularism and modernity.

The mistrust and hurt of partition has become ingrained amongst Indians and Pakistanis. Over the years radical elements have fanned these doubts into fears in both countries.

"Is it true that Muslims in India are persecuted?" asked me a middle-aged lady, as I shopped for "Khedis" for my Dad, who had spend his childhood and youth in Lahore, the Paris of the East. I was in the crowded 200-year old "Anarkali" bazaar and was taken aback by the bold and blunt query. The lady had realised that I was an Indian, as I struggled to put

together some local currency to pay the shopkeeper.

"Madam, I could be the only Hindu and Indian in this ancient, beautiful market of about 15,000 Pakistani Muslims. Yet I shop here, alone without fear. So how can about 177 million Muslims in India be frightened?" I asked her. "Remember, we have as many Muslims in India, as there are in Pakistan," I replied.

I could not help adding, "Look at many of the nationally admired idols in India. Actors Dilip Kumar (Yusuf Khan), Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan, Nargis Dutt, Madhubala (Mumtaz Jehan), Waheeda Rehman. We have had three Muslim presidents Zakir Hussein, Fukhruddin Ali Ahmed and Abdul Kalam. One of the richest Indians is a Muslim, Azim Premji." The lady summarised, "So perhaps politicians and media exaggerate issues." The shopkeeper refused the money for the shoes after my passionate response.

Every stone, every pebble in Lahore holds a secret. It conceals centuries of history in it - from the Mongols, the Mughals, the Sikhs, the British to the present. Lahore is not just a petite town, it is an open book of history.

he spring festival had adorned Lahore with bright yellow and pink flowers at every corner. Lahore after all these centuries, yet resembles a beautiful lass in bridal finery. It is clean and tidy. The gurgling canal yet runs through the centre of Mall Road, providing twinkling chimes throughout the day. Tradition merge elegantly with modernity, the ruins of Emperor Akbar's Lahore Fort blend with contemporary villas and hotels.

Islamabad is a steel, cement and glass modern city. Its five star hotels have world class amenities and services. The 367 km M2 Motorway from Lahore to Islamabad, covers the distance in 5 hours, crossing the highest pillared-bridge in

Asia at the Khewra Salt Range.

Pakistan also teems with entrepreneurs. Seema runs 450 outlets of fashion garments, branded "Bareeze". Omar runs 400 outlets of a leading footwear, "Servis". Both are market leaders. These young entrepreneurs are the new face of Pakistan.

Despite all the differences that plague the countries, Bollywood films and songs are immensely popular in Pakistan. Movies, music and cricket can bond these two distant neighbours. New friends like Nabeel, Syed, Rahail, Nofil, all young students, pampered us with Punjabi "lassis", pickles and melodious songs at the "Monal" restaurant, on a mountain near Islamabad. Islamabad seemed a twinkling fairyland from the top of the mountain.

On return to India, my father's face lit up, when I presented him with a simple bottle of water, from the land of his birth and youth. Seeing his delight, I reflected, here are two neighbours united by centuries of culture and tradition, but divided by a rottenly managed partition and a mountain of misunderstandings.

India and Pakistan can also wallow the mountain of misunderstandings. One step, at a time. The fresh, youthful breezes blowing across both the countries may usher new possibilities.

(The author visited Pakistan as part of the Harvard Business School Pakistan Study delegation in the first week of April. He has worked for Unilever in Asia, Latin America and Africa. A Sir Dorabji Tata Scholar, he has authored a book, "Agenda for a New India".)

Lahore Museum



New Beginning



The Badshahi Mosque, Lahore

Lahore Museum



Badshahi mosque

