The Washington Post

Outlook • Perspective

How it felt to be Pakistani in India during the triumph of Hindu nationalism

The tragedy of ethnic conflict compounded the tragedy of partition.

By Bilal Qureshi August 24

Bilal Qureshi, a writer and radio journalist, is working on a memoir about contemporary Muslim identity. From 2008 to 2015, he was a producer and editor with NPR's "All Things Considered."

Seventy years ago this month, my grandfather fled India to join millions of refugees in a new country to be known as Pakistan. He survived the ordeal across the still-unmarked border, but he lost family and friends in the killings, expulsions and unimaginable acts of vengeance that accompanied the making of India and Pakistan. These episodes still haunt the subcontinent. My grandfather died four decades later at his home in Lahore. He never returned to his village 20 miles away in what became a different country.

I thought often about his journey as I packed up two years of life in Delhi in preparation for my own, very different, Indian departure. My partner's job

had brought us there, and we returned to Washington this month. But despite the privilege of my U.S. passport, I lived in Delhi with the painful echoes of my grandfather's partition. For almost two years, I lived as a Pakistani-born Muslim in Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist India. I knew that the experience would be disorienting, but nothing could have prepared me for how vast, toxic and enduring partition had become.

When I first landed in Delhi, the city seemed eerily familiar and welcoming. I beheld the same faces, music, spices and noisy alleyways from my childhood in Lahore. The city's colonial avenues blended with its red sandstone Mughal monuments, just as they do in my home city. But then in the middle of introductions that first day, my driver revealed his great hope for war. He hated Pakistanis. "They're a nation of terrorists," he said. He wanted the new prime minister to consider using nuclear weapons against them. My instinct was to pass this off as the ramblings of an uneducated man. But I soon discovered how normalized, among all kinds of people, these views had become.

One example is a new intolerance for India's history of religious coexistence. A month after I arrived, students at Delhi's leading public university were arrested and charged with sedition for criticizing the government. They were eventually released and suspended, but the term "anti-national," which implied pro-Pakistan (and thus pro-Muslim), entered the lexicon soon after as a powerful epithet. Trolls took to Twitter and the streets to police anyone who dared to speak out against the state. One day I opened the newspaper to find an image of two bodies — one a 35-year-old man, the other a 12-year-old boy — dangling from a tree. They were Muslim cattle traders who had been lynched by Hindu cow-protection vigilantes. Their corpses were meant to send a warning to those suspected of eating, transporting or selling beef. As similar attacks on Muslims grew in frequency and brutality, the leadership's silence spoke volumes. Although I was privileged by Indian standards, with a gated apartment and a driver, I became depressed and increasingly nervous about leaving home.

A yoga teacher concluded a much-needed meditation practice with an unexpected tirade against Muslims. According to him, they'd ruined the city with their filth and multiplying population. He told me I needed to accept my community's culpability in its subservient condition. I stayed silent during political dinner conversations that turned to the question of my nebulous heritage. "I'm American" never sufficed, so I evaded the subject. Everywhere I went, I was simply mistaken for an Indian Muslim and treated with neither the reverence nor the hustle reserved for Western tourists. I passed. But I was definitely elsewhere on the inside.

After a skirmish over the conflict in Kashmir, Pakistani actors and musicians were banned from Bollywood films, and it became mandatory to stand for the Indian national anthem before each movie. A disabled man was slapped and berated in one cinema for not standing up, in a case of mistaken anti-nationalism. I always obligingly mouthed the words of the anthem I didn't recognize. I adapted my parents' Urdu to sound like Delhi's colloquial Hindi. (The languages that once played together had also become partitioned.) I raised my hands to say "ram ram" to the saffron-robed walkers in Lodi Gardens when "salaam" had once been my default setting. I was a closeted Pakistani, and only my very closest friends knew. I often wondered when and where I would be found out.

I never went to Pakistan from India, and nobody from my family ever came to visit. Since the Pakistani terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008, it has become almost impossible to get visas to travel across the divide. There is only one weekly flight between Lahore and Delhi. The closest I came to my Pakistani family was at the daily border ceremony at the crossing between the two countries near the city of Amritsar in Punjab. Every night at sunset, crowds gather on each side to watch Indian and Pakistani troops march toward each other as the gates are briefly flung open, then immediately shut. With soldiers in full regalia, soundtracked to military pomp and circumstance, the Indian ceremony is meant to stir audiences into a frenzy of nationalism. I had my first truly out-of-body experience sitting at the edge of the Indian stands looking at the Pakistanis beyond. They were seated behind

rows of barbed wire, past the patch of no-man's land and an arsenal of armed guards. They dressed as my Lahori relatives did, and they were playing pop songs I grew up with, remixed with the call to prayer. On India's side, the speakers blared Bollywood anthems at full blast as men and women rushed to join the soldiers in bhangra dances. India was adding seating space to answer bursting demand. Performances were increasingly sold out, thanks to resurgent nationalism.

This was the region where my grandfather was born and where blood, rape and massacre were unleashed on an undocumented and unspeakable scale in 1947. The way that painful legacy was turned into a carnivalesque celebration of enmity made it the ugliest place I had seen in South Asia. It was the performance of familial hatred for cheap titillation and political affirmation. At some point, I stopped watching and looked up at the beautiful sunset. As the ceremony concluded, the crowds in the risers walked as close to one another as they could get. The occasional person on each side waved, with utmost curiosity, at the other next door, who looked, sounded and seemed the same but lived in a country so far out of reach.

On many days, I felt like I was being metaphorically ejected from India. I was living on the wrong side. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's extraordinary electoral victories across the country made secular liberals and minority communities feel unwelcome and unsafe. In March, the prime minister appointed a fervently anti-Muslim cleric as the chief minister of the country's largest state. Hindu mobs harassed Muslim families to "go back" to a country they never came from: Pakistan.

Then one day, spring arrived, and Delhi suddenly looked just like Lahore: lush, floral and filled with what seemed like every species of bird that's ever existed. Peacocks landed on balconies, and trees exploded with blossoms and fragrances. I stopped reading the news and started spending more time talking to neighbors and friends. We tuned into other frequencies. We discussed books, music, our melodramatic Punjabi families and the daily ordeals of the city's horrendous traffic. It was a welcome reprieve from the

rhetoric of difference. Even I began forgetting my secret.

One fundamental question that haunts the relationship between Indians and Pakistanis is whether partition should have happened. Wouldn't we be better off together? I don't know the answer, and I find it increasingly pointless to imagine the hypothetical possibilities. The tragedy of borders is that they eventually become real. India and Pakistan have turned into two very different societies. They have had different traumas and triumphs since 1947.

But they also share a much longer history and a familial bond. After living in India, I feel that the tragedy of partition is a more personal, unknowable one. What relationships, friendships and conversations never began? What ideas were unformed and unsaid that could have changed lives? For Pakistanis, only a sliver of the subcontinent's extraordinary history and geography is accessible. For India's Hindus and Sikhs, who were expelled from their former Pakistani villages and cities, homes, lives and stories have been erased by the Islamic republic.

Archiving the loss and suffering of that dying generation is so important. But in my life in India 70 years later, I was fortunate eventually to discover friends, mentors and family I never knew I had. Our ties were not based on bloodlines or nationalities, but on our shared language, geography and cultural references that felt deeper and more human. India's Sufi poets always sang that the greatest journeys bring you home — and to yourself. As I traveled across the country, I thought of all the people who were not and will not be allowed to make that journey. I thought of my father's relatives, who have never been able to go back to their homes next door to see what remains of the world that made them.

As I left Delhi, a series of panels to mark partition began, and the city's beggars walked barefoot through traffic selling cheap flags and tricolored trinkets. I returned to America on Aug. 14, Pakistan's independence day. India's monumental celebrations followed the next day. In my own small

way, was this a Pakistani partition from India once more? On our last Friday there, friends gathered in our Delhi home for an evening of farewells, and I realized that I no longer saw India as an abstraction filtered through the painful lens of partition. The other side had become my home. The choice to make a life there for two years despite the unwelcoming mood was a small, personal act of rebellion against the logic, brutality and irreversibility of partition. I'll have these friendships forever, and I'll always be grateful that I had the chance to make the return my grandfather never could. Partition is permanent, but I hope parting doesn't have to be.

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