

Shared heritage of Indians and Pakistanis

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My parents are from Delhi, and my wife's from Hyderabad (Deccan). They settled in Lahore and Karachi respectively, and I was brought up in Pakistan (mostly in the Himalayan North West Frontier, and Lahore for medical education). Recently we took our 2 children to India and Pakistan (the first time back for me after 18 years in the U.S.). We went to India first, and stayed at a bed-and-breakfast with a wonderful Indian family; it felt like home! Our driver in Delhi and Agra was from Nepal, and the cook from Bengal (he prepared delicious meals for us!).

I made a special point to visit my father's old house in Old Delhi, and also paid a visit to Gandhi Samadhi, in addition to various sites in the city. We had the best time. The people were so friendly, especially the schoolchildren whom we saw walking everywhere in their uniforms in a disciplined fashion. We then proceeded to go to Karachi to stay with family and meet my aging parents. Again, we were struck by the affability and welcoming attitude of the common people (in spite of the unfortunate Benazir Bhutto event that happened while we were there). Needless to say our children were thrilled to meet their cousins as well.

It was a life-changing experience for us; one that I had never expected would impact us so much. I think broadening our visit to include both countries was the key. What I took away from our trip was this: the people of the subcontinent have so much in common: a shared heritage of land, history, language, culture, traditions, music, food, dress,...yes! even our thoughts and goals.....I could go on and on. Our common themes are stronger and more numerous than our differences (even the latter are merely a manifestation of our richness and diversity, as I see it). It is sad that at times we have chosen to accentuate our presumed differences to the extent of going to war, launching an arms race, and fan the flames of hatred.

Yet, when I reflect upon our recent first-hand interactions with the "men (and women) on the street", and as long as the spirit of our common humanity is alive, I see cause for hope. I wish ordinary citizens could change things....and perhaps they can, by refusing to bow to fear, ignorance, and prejudice. I am reminded of these lines by Omar Khayyam,

"Ah

love! Could thou and I with fate conspire

To
grasp this sorry scheme of things entire

Would
not we shatter it to pieces, and then

Re-mould
it nearer to the heart's desire!"

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