

No place between wickets for India-Pakistan tensions

BY KATE TAYLOR

In recent days, as India and Pakistan came almost to the brink of war, the members of the Boston Gymkhana Sports Club — a cricket club that, like many others in the United States, has members from both countries — did not interrupt their usual social calendar.

Some were on edge about the escalation between the two nuclear-armed nations, which began on Feb. 14 when a suicide bombing in the disputed region of Kashmir killed more than 40 Indian soldiers. And many had sharply different perspectives on the conflict.

Rajiv Shah, 46, who emigrated in 1999 from the Indian state of Gujarat, was approving when the Indian government conducted airstrikes in Pakistan, claiming to kill a large number of terrorists.

Others felt that India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, was exploiting the situation, intentionally ramping up tensions in hopes of solidifying his support in the coming elections.

At least a couple of members gave some credence to conspiracy theories that the Indian government itself might be behind the terrorist attack.

And yet, there was a birthday to celebrate: The club's founder, Bikram Singh, was turning 53. Club members, accustomed to setting aside differences and carrying on with their friendships at times of heightened hostility between the two nations, were planning a party.

"No matter what, we live and play or interact with people that we completely disagree with sometimes, but we still manage," said Mr. Singh, whose family is from the northwestern Indian state of Punjab.

The past week has seen some people in India and Pakistan openly root for



M. SCOTT BRAUER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Bikram Singh, left, chatting during his birthday party with Nafis Ahmad. Mr. Singh, whose family is from the Indian state of Punjab, is the founder of the Boston Gymkhana Sports Club, a cricket club with members from India and Pakistan. Mr. Ahmad is Pakistani.

war, while others have urged the country's leaders to find a way to end the crisis. (Pakistan's prime minister, Imran Khan — himself a former cricket star — made a move in that direction and gained an international publicity coup, when he released an Indian pilot whom Pakistan had captured. That reduced tensions somewhat, although shelling

continued along the disputed border.)

In the United States, sentiments were similarly mixed: Some Indian-Americans protested outside the Pakistani consulates in New York and Chicago, accusing the country of harboring terrorists, while others joined marches for peace.

But among the members of the Bos-

ton Gymkhana Sports Club, there was no palpable unease as they gathered on Sunday evening at Mr. Singh's comfortable home in Norfolk, Mass., about 40 minutes southwest of Boston. Mr. Singh, who had just returned from a vacation to India — his trip home took some 51 hours, because his flight had to be diverted to avoid Pakistani airspace, he

said — wore a saffron-colored vest and sipped whiskey. Vegetable fritters and other appetizers were laid out, and club members and their wives and a few teenage children greeted each other with hugs.

The roughly 40 guests were a subset of the cricket club's membership, which Mr. Singh said is between 150 and 200, depending on the year. The majority are from India; Mr. Singh estimated that about 10 percent are from Pakistan.

Over all, several members agreed, the club members do not discuss the decades-long conflict between India and Pakistan much.

"Some of it is deferential, so you obviously try not to hurt the other person's feelings," Nafis Ahmad, 51, who is from Karachi, Pakistan, explained the day before the party. He added: "Our club is kind of gentlemanly in a sense. We try not to delve into topics that are too controversial."

On Sunday, at a reporter's request, a group of the party guests agreed to move into the poker room to discuss the most recent escalation. There was no one from Kashmir, the region at the center of the rivalry, whose residents are often left out of the debate about the two country's actions. It wasn't long before differences emerged.

Omar Virk, 28, who grew up outside Lahore, Pakistan, and came to the United States three and a half years ago to study for his bachelor's degree at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, said he believed that India's prime minister was purposefully stoking the conflict.

"Modi is trying to push into this one," he said. "You know how he won the last election, right? He was anti-Pakistan from the start."

"I disagree with that," said Moin Ghouse, 38, who is from the Indian city of Hyderabad.

"I think Modi is politically savvy enough to understand the risks involved in going for an all-out war," Mr. Ghouse added.

Mr. Virk began talking about theories he said were being discussed on Indian television suggesting that Mr. Modi was behind the terrorist attack. "Nobody can prove that," he added, though he said he had been thinking the same thing.

Others said the idea was absurd.

Mr. Shah, the club member from Gujarat — Mr. Modi's home state, where he was chief minister in 2002 when deadly religious riots took place in which roughly a thousand people, mostly Muslims, were killed — said many Indians were thrilled that Mr. Modi had taken a stand and attacked Pakistan in response to the suicide bombing.

One of Mr. Singh's close friends, Parak Ananta, began reminding the group that dinner was getting cold downstairs. Eventually, everyone went down to eat.

Asked when club members last had a conversation like this, Mr. Singh said that it had been years ago, when he started a Facebook group for members and others to discuss a series of India-Pakistan cricket games. Mr. Ananta had thought starting the group was a bad idea — that passions would run too high, and people would say things they would regret. Looking back, Mr. Ananta said that he felt he had been right; discussions had damaged some friendships.

"We have to be real sometime," Mr. Singh insisted. "We can't just be in a cocoon all the time."

Mr. Ananta disagreed. "Even between wife and husband there are certain things that are taboo," he said.