

# That thing that India and Pakistan do

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Contributing Writer

**KARACHI, PAKISTAN** Four years ago when India elected the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) to power, Pakistan's iconic feminist poet and peace activist Fahmida Riaz recited a poem of despair, comparing new India to old Pakistan:

*Turns out you were just like us,  
Where were you hiding all this time,  
brother?*

In Pakistan, Ms. Riaz is not only considered a hopeless peacenik but also a bit of an India lover. She has reason to be. In the 1980s, like many writers and activists, Ms. Riaz was made to leave Pakistan by the then military regime. While others took refuge in Western countries, Ms. Riaz chose to go into exile in India, where she then lived for more than six years. She is a much-loved poet who is not afraid of speaking truth to power at home and abroad. She is also not afraid of hoping.

Last Thursday other peaceniks in Pakistan and India were hoping, too, as the two countries agreed to resume talks. The wave of optimism lasted a day.

Pakistan's new prime minister, Imran Khan, had written a letter to the Indian government suggesting that the Pakistani and Indian foreign ministers meet during the United Nations General Assembly's annual session when it opened this week. India had accepted, but made it clear that the meeting would be not a resumption of talks, only a meeting.

Given that the last meeting of the foreign secretaries, three years ago, was called off at the last moment, this was seen as a good enough development. There had also been reports earlier that Pakistan's army chief had approached his Indian counterpart in an attempt to restart some sort of peace process.

And then India and Pakistan did what India and Pakistan do. On Friday, the Indian government, in a harshly worded statement, suddenly declared that it had just seen "the true face" of Mr. Khan and there would be no meeting. It claimed that Pakistan had issued a series of postage stamps about what Pakistan calls "occupied Kashmir" and celebrating a slain anti-India Kashmiri militant. India also accused Pakistan of killing three Indian policemen along the Line of Control.

Only, the stamps were issued before Mr. Khan became prime minister. And killings along both sides of the border, of soldiers and civilians, has been a horrific routine for many years.

From there, the media in both countries went into an almost-default war-hysteria mode. Mr. Khan tweeted, in clear reference to Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, "all my life I have come across small men occupying big offices." The Indian Army chief said that Pakistan should be punished for its barbarism and made to feel pain. The spokesman of the Pakistani Army declared that it was ready for war but was choosing peace. Pakistan's season-



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al jihadists chimed in to say that the army should put them on the border as a first line of defense.

Within a matter of 72 hours the situation went from "Let's sit down to talk about talks" to "I'll smack you in the face." Schoolyard brawls have a more nuanced buildup.

In contrast to the Pakistani Army, the Indian Army is seen as subservient to the civilian authorities. Pakistani democrats like to remind us that the Indian Army stays away from politics and that's why democracy has flourished in India. But after the Indian Army chief's promise of pain, the Pakistani government's spokesman declared that he was acting like a B.J.P. functionary.

Here is the Pakistani army, which has ruled this country directly for more than half its life, accusing the Indian Army of interfering in political affairs. Irony said a final *namaste* and jumped into the Ganges.

Pundits say Friday's turnabout is all about elections in India. Mr. Modi faces a tough election next year, and his government is rankled by a scandal involving more than \$9 billion given to an Indian tycoon for manufacturing French jet fighters. The tycoon has

never built anything remotely looking like a plane before. Mr. Modi is being called corrupt by his political opponents. His answer? Look behind you! Pakistan is planning to kill us all.

A few months ago when Mr. Khan was campaigning, his mantra was that the incumbent Nawaz Sharif was soft on India. His supporters declared Mr.

**India becoming Pakistan's murderous other is no consolation for our own failings.**

Sharif "Modi ka yaar" (Modi's bestie) because Mr. Sharif had attended Mr. Modi's inauguration as prime minister in 2014 and the Indian premier had paid a surprise private visit to Mr. Sharif's estate outside Lahore in 2015. Now the B.J.P.'s ruling party head honcho, Amit Shah, says: Look, Pakistan wants Mr. Modi gone, as does the Indian opposition leader Rahul Gandhi. If there is trouble at home, you throw your trash at your neighbor and call your fellow countrymen traitors.

On Sep. 28-30, India is scheduled to hold a mega celebration to mark the so-called surgical strikes, or the light-

ning attack, it waged on Pakistan two years ago, in which Indian soldiers crossed the Line of Control and taught Pakistani forces a lesson. Pakistan denies that any such strikes took place. Then again, it routinely celebrates wars with India which it never won. Now India is going to celebrate a battle that Pakistan says never happened.

This warmongering helps cover up some basic issues on both sides. In a recent TV interview, the son of a slain Indian soldier was asked whether he wanted revenge for his dad's death. The boy seemed confused, looked around as if he didn't know why he was being asked the question. My dad can't come back, he said, but can you guys get my younger brother a job? "How many times do I have to ask for a job for my younger brother?"

Do people want revenge or do people want jobs? While on both sides millions struggle to feed their families, for many people, beating the war drums is a lucrative job. A perma-war means a perma-job.

India and Pakistan have many things in common besides food and music. India has blinded more civilians in Kashmir with pellet guns than any

other regime in the recorded history of the world. Pakistan has abducted many of its own citizens and disappeared them for years. Both acted in the name of national security.

An Indian journalist recently mentioned to me Ms. Riaz's poem in a phone conversation. She said: You Pakistanis must be feeling pretty smug about what's going on in India, quoting Ms. Riaz to one another. She was talking as if India becoming Pakistan's murderous other was a consolation for our failings. No, I said, most Pakistanis don't go around quoting that poem.

I reread it recently, and it's not a bugger-off, you-are-just-like-us poem. After much lamenting and comparing our base urges, the poem ends on an intimate note, almost like a bored lover's parting words:

*When you do reach your promised land,  
Do write us an occasional letter.*

But India and Pakistan have reached a stage where they can't even leave each other a Post-it note.

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**The Pakistani military in Karachi this month commemorating its second war with India in 1965. Both sides claimed victory.**