

The People Next Door: The Curious History of India's Relations with Pakistan. Raghavan, T C. India: Harper Collins Publishers, 2017, 303.

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Raghavan, who retired from the Indian Foreign Service in December 2015, at the end of a two-year period as India's High Commissioner to Pakistan, has seen and led the Indian diplomacy with the neighbour for even longer. Unlike other books by the Indian authors about Pakistan, Raghavan's narrative has little animosity as he tries to explain India-Pakistan issues with more nuance. This is not surprising given his stint in Pakistan it also shows how individual and personal relations between people — such as himself and the several Pakistani that he mentions in the book — enable an author to have a better understanding of a country and its people.

If Raghavan had given us his personal stories, about his life in Pakistan, his perceptions and expectations, as well as what this experience has been all about, it would have been a good addition to books about India-Pakistan relations. After all, it is these personal stories that have a larger impact. As it is, Raghavan simply gives us a narrative of the past and events he came across being the ambassador to Pakistan. Having said that it must also be noted that the style of writing is easy and fluid, his narrative is cogent and without any major gaps. He tells us about India-Pakistan relations in the form of a story and, thus, the book will introduce to new generations in a good and accessible way an old story.

Raghavan has highlighted the major events and negotiations between the Pak-Indian leadership in his well-researched and coherent book. In the first chapter, he narrates the tragic event of partition in 1947, highlighting the events of their time and their effects on the people. He notes that from "June-July 1947 to January 1948, the bulk of the ethnic cleansing in the East and West Punjab was completed. Some 12 million refugees had traversed in both directions of the newly plotted parts of the Radcliffe Line that divided and defined the newly emerged countries in Punjab. East Punjab now falling

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in India was largely emptied of Muslims and West Punjab in Pakistan of Hindus and Sikhs. The uprooting of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs was systematic: the houses were occupied, farms were taken over, mosques, temples and gurdwaras desecrated, tens of thousands killed and women targeted for rape and abduction.”

Raghavan describes how the small princely states acceded to India and Pakistan and the corresponding disputes of Junagadh and Jammu and Kashmir. India refused to accept the accession of Junagadh on the basis of demography and Pakistan made similar arguments about Jammu and Kashmir’s accession to India. Raghavan also opines that the Indian Prime Minister Nehru did not accept Khan of Kalat’s accession to India because of the geographical position of the state.

The writer is of the view that in October-November 1962, in a border war of India-China, the country was left demoralised. He acknowledges that during this crisis, Pakistan stayed put and made no military moves to derive any advantage from this situation. Many in India expected a Pakistan thrust at this time to use the China war to its advantage. Raghavan also discusses the Indian nuclear explosion in 1974, by Indira Gandhi, which started hostility between Indira Gandhi and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto by saying that the explosion was a dangerous development and a threat to Pakistan. Bhutto’s stance was that “we will also do so [build the bomb], even if we have to eat grass.” Following this, Raghavan also details how Pakistan proceeded, leading eventually to an interview of A Q Khan with the visiting Indian journalist, Kuldip Nayyar, in which he admitted that “we are satisfied with the results. If you ever drive us to the wall, as you did in East Pakistan, we will use the bomb. When the story finally appeared, the US Congress was to pass a bill for aid to Pakistan, in turn, requiring a presidential certification that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear weapon.”

Raghavan also highlights issues regarding Siachin. He is of the view that in the most Pakistani accounts, India, after first agreeing to a Siachen pull-out in June 1989, in a meeting between the Defence Secretaries, went back on its word as public criticism and resistance to the move made Rajiv Gandhi lose his nerve. Certainly, immediately after the June 1989 meeting, the Pakistani media interpreted the joint statement issued as a breakthrough and a major gain for Pakistan. Some Indian newspapers, too, reported the conclusion as being an Indian pullback. India denied that any agreement on

withdrawal had been reached since what were being discussed were the present and future positions on the glacier. In Pakistan, this interpretation led to the charge of backtracking.

Raghavan's account is also filled with anecdotes that offer both interesting tidbits about individuals and information about the larger narrative. For instance, he discusses Prime Minister Vajpayee's Lahore visit and the summit with Nawaz Sharif that was a triumph of symbolism. One Pakistani account called it a grand ephemeral success. There were also discordant signs during the visit itself for the naysayers on both sides to later argue over and they did with some force that publicity stunts were not going to advance India-Pakistan relations. Even as Vajpayee began his journey to Pakistan, the news was coming in of fresh terrorist attacks in Jammu and Kashmir. Thus, Raghavan takes us through some of the most important and contentious moments and incidents in India-Pakistan history.

Raghavan reminds us that after Vajpayee's visit, things were getting better but after some time intelligence started accumulating from early May 1999 of unusual infiltrations across the line of control from Pakistan in the heights of Kargil in Jammu and Kashmir. This led to Pakistan denying any involvement and references to Kashmiri Mujahideen activity. The Indian army battled its way from peak to peak, while diplomacy also continued. Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, visited New Delhi on June 12, 1999, to meet Jaswant Singh to see if a way out could be found. For India, the position was clear: there was nothing to discuss unless Pakistan first withdrew its forces from across the Line of Control (LoC). It was a position that none could disagree within the international community, too.

Raghavan similarly discusses the terrorist attack on Mumbai in November 2008, regarding which he notes the disappointment of the assurances in the erstwhile Islamabad Declaration. Raghavan had an insider view of this phase, too, as he served on the Pakistan Desk in the Ministry of External Affairs from 2007 to 2009. His narrative also takes us through the events following the attacks, as he describes the valiant attempt to resurrect the suspended dialogue process in Egypt, in Sharm al-Sheikh at the margins of Non Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in July 2009. In a meeting with the Pakistani Prime Minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, an agreement was reached that contacts would continue to address outstanding issues and improve atmospherics. The statement issued had also a reference to

Pakistan's concerns about the terrorist incidents in Balochistan. While highlighting these incidents, Raghavan admirably shows that the past never goes away and contends that in coming to grips with the history of two countries, nothing is perhaps as invaluable as "encountering sentiments and experiences of others who have interfaced with India-Pakistan relations and connections they have drawn between different events and processes." As a result, one can hope the prevailing mindset in India of rejecting any proposals of talks and peace can be eventually overcome with this benefit of hindsight that comes with books such as Raghavan's.

Raghavan telescopes the history, from 2008 till the present day, in a few pages but in his reckoning now "enough has changed to make sure older solutions will not work." Nonetheless, "the cyclical pattern" of reconciliatory moves and hawkish standoffs will go on. His book argues that in India-Pakistan ties, you must keep inhaling the voices of the past to deal with the present.