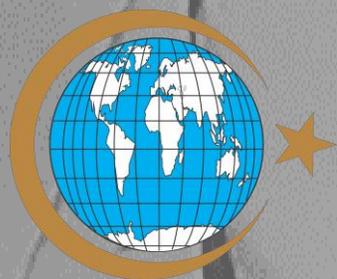


India and Pakistan: *Searching for Humanity in South Asia*

Ambassador Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed



**INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES
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Searching for Humanity in the Age of Madness

I would like to thank Ambassador Aizaz Chaudhry, Director General of the Institute, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman, and their distinguished colleagues for inviting me to this special lecture. I am grateful to Dr. Rajmohan Gandhi for being a discussant today.

My talk will be in three parts. The first will be called Madness, the second Hatred and the third Hope. I will then present my conclusions.

Madness

Bernard-Henri Levy, the French celebrity philosopher, has coined the phrase for the period in which we are living as the age of madness. The coronavirus, he has argued, is revealing the fault-lines that divide society. We in South Asia appear to be living in our own bubble of hyper-madness within the age of madness.

There is a battle brewing that will define not only India but the entire region. If the mood of unchecked hate grows in India, a clash with Pakistan will be inevitable and it could involve a nuclear exchange. The leaders of India can huff and puff against Pakistan but in their heart of hearts they can never be sure that Pakistan, if attacked and backed into a corner, would not press the nuclear button.

The two nuclear armed nations appear to be teetering on the brink of conflict. You would expect the leaders to tip-toe back from the brink. That is not the case. Now with the China-India confrontation in the Himalayas the situation becomes even more dangerous and complicated. There are now three nuclear powers rubbing against each other in and around Kashmir, and with the US explicitly lining up with India, it makes four. Soon it may be too late for South Asia.

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It is this uncertainty that gives the confrontation an existentialist edge. A single minute miscalculation could plunge the entire region into apocalyptic chaos. It would be an extinction level event. Let those planning nuclear destruction of the enemy understand there will be no winners. Mutual destruction is assured.

In the sci-fi classic *The Planet of the Apes* when a nuclear apocalypse destroys the planet the only victors are the apes. The last lines of *The Planet of the Apes* are as eloquent as any of Shakespeare's. They could be the epitaph for South Asia if we continue on the current path of madness: "You finally really did it. You maniacs. You blew it up. God damn you. God damn you all to hell."

Hatred

There are two sets of grievances poisoning the atmosphere in South Asia and we need to navigate between them. The Hindu sees real or imagined insults and humiliation under Muslim rule over the centuries. Muslim grievances are more recent. They see themselves as victims of Hindu prejudice and violent hatred in the last decades of independent India dominated by Hindu culture and politics.

I could give dozens of examples from newspaper reports and widely seen videos of the horrific violence against Muslims in India. The controversy around *Panipat*, the recent Bollywood historical blockbuster about an invading Afghan warrior king, that erupted last year in India was not an isolated incident. Just as President Donald Trump had labeled immigrants coming to the US from the Latin south as rapists and murderers, Bollywood had aggressively begun to make films depicting Muslims coming from the north as rapists and murderers. 2018's *Padmaavat* about Alauddin Khilji depicted him in this negative light. There is already a full-blown campaign to malign the historical image of Tipu Sultan, ruler of the south Indian Kingdom of Mysore and once seen as a celebrated nationalist Indian ruler (and Prime Minister Imran Khan's hero). Songs like the one by Laxmi Dubey threatening to "perform ceremonies with bullets," and "cut off the tongues of enemies who talk against Ram" are blasted into Muslim neighborhoods to intimidate them.

Mobs of Hindus armed with staffs go out looking for members of the minority communities and kill them often aided by the police. All the while the gang films the gory details on videos that

are then widely circulated. In the mayhem, Hindu sadhus, Dalit, Christians and even nuns have been attacked.

Muslims have been targeted in the name of “cow protection” by the mobs. Muslims are now accused of bringing coronavirus as part of their “Corona jihad.” The Coronavirus upon its arrival on the subcontinent turned everything upside down. Indeed, the Indian establishment reacted with Pavlovian predictability by blaming it on Muslims/Pakistan. Even medical doctors, discarding the Hippocratic Oath, have made public statements blaming Muslims for spreading the coronavirus and advising the hospital staff not to treat them as they would be better dead.

A leader in the Hindu nationalist Dharm Jagran Samiti organization announced on television a target to “finish Islam and Christianity” in the country by the year 2022, while a member of the Legislative Assembly from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Uttar Pradesh, the nation’s most populous state, set a date of 2024 when India would be exclusively Hindu and spoke of the “animalistic tendency” of Muslims.

From the harsh lockdown in Kashmir, to the lynching and burnings across India, to the citizenship laws that make Muslims third-class citizens in their own land, to the media and police onslaught, the Muslims of India are reeling. In the public’s mind Muslims and Pakistan are fused and the hatred easily shifts from one to the other. The acclaimed Indian novelist Arundhati Roy speaks of a “crisis of hatred against Muslims.”

The tragedy is that the prejudice is accompanied by ignorance. How many politicians and media pundits know of Babar’s beautiful letter written just before he died to his son Humayun who was the next emperor of India? “Oh, my son,” begins the letter, keep your “heart cleansed of religious bigotry,” see that “temples and abodes of worship of every community, should not be damaged,” “bring together the diverse religions” “in particular refrain from the sacrifice of cows,” and “dispense justice according to the tenets of each community.” Islam is best served by “The sword of kindness, not by the sword of oppression.” Babar’s celebrated autobiography reflects exactly the same spirit of inclusiveness and generosity. Presidents and Prime Ministers today, and not only in South Asia, could learn a great deal about governance and humanity from Babar.

For those who claim Muslims contributed nothing to India, let me state that we cannot contemplate Indian culture or history without the Muslim imprint whether it is in art, architecture

or political leadership. I could give an endless list of Muslim contributions starting with two of India's most iconic symbols—the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort. The prejudice against Muslims is also a betrayal of those Muslims who marched for Independence shoulder to shoulder with the Mahatma like Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi, and Maulana Azad.

Although India's founding fathers Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru promoted coexistence between the religions, their vision of modern India is facing an existential crisis. There were many tell-tale symbols of the ignominious rejection of Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violence in India; Gandhi's ashes being stolen; Gandhi's image being publicly shot at by the national secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha organization; Gandhi's killer being hailed by the title "Mahatma," temples being constructed in his honor and a cult of personality built around him; above all the overt rejection of *ahimsa* or non-violence and the frequent explosions of violence.

Hope

Theories of geopolitics that dominate local thinking are based in modern constructs that calculate on the basis of the zero-sum equation and the clash of civilizations in which the aim is not to merely defeat the enemy but extermination. These theories rarely if ever take into account human emotions and human feelings.

Seeing the ugly confrontation between India and Pakistan and the disgusting acts of violence that it has generated on the Subcontinent it is understandable to see Hindus and Muslims and Indians and Pakistanis as eternal foes with undying hatred for each other. And Muslim mobs in Pakistan and Bangladesh have exhibited similar violent hatred towards their Hindu and other minorities. One might assume that there is nothing but hatred between Hindus and Muslims. This is, however, an incorrect reading of history. As an anthropologist I will share the following personal examples which throw light on the subject and challenge the idea of an immutable confrontation between the two faiths.

The first example is of the esteemed Hindu scholar Nirad C. Chaudhuri. In the 1960s I had read Nirad Babu's classic *The Continent of Circe: Being an Essay on the Peoples of India*. Impressed by Nirad Babu's knowledge of the Subcontinent and attention to detail, I decided to interview him for my own book *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* (Routledge, 1991) when I was based in Cambridge in the late 1980s. I thought he might have insights into the region of Waziristan to

add something new to my perspective. At first those who acted as his minders in Oxford where he lived were reluctant to give me access and asked many questions as to why I wanted to see him. A nonagenarian, he was also something of a celebrity curiosity. Nirad Babu was 5 feet in height but intellectually he towered over those around him. On his hundredth birthday, the Queen and the President of Oxford University sent messages of congratulations.

When I told his minders I had been Sub-Divisional Magistrate or Assistant Commissioner in charge of Kishoreganj, Nirad Babu's hometown, in Mymensingh District, I was immediately invited to Oxford. Once there he asked intelligent questions based on his readings of Waziristan: he asked about the river Tochi and about the legendary Fakir of Ipi. In between the volley of questions he delivered brief lectures on the tribes and terrain of Waziristan. Nirad Babu had the reputation of being a walking encyclopedia and I was not disappointed.

But it was his hometown at the other end of the Subcontinent in Kishoreganj that was on his mind. He had left his family home in Kishoreganj in what became East Pakistan and found himself a refugee first in India and then in England. To him, I became a link, however weak, with his own past. Again and again, he came back to Kishoreganj, soaking up information like a thirsty traveler gulping water. He asked many questions about his home, which I had visited while on a tour of the area. My visit was a homage to his scholarship, and little did I imagine that one day I would meet him. It was a largish rural house and kept in good condition by the family retainers. Every time I reminded him that it was getting late for my train, he suggested I take a later train. That afternoon, we were two exiles from a beautiful land united by our distant memories of it.

When I requested a blurb from him for my book, he readily agreed. That encounter in Oxford, my reaching out to an old man in exile still yearning for his homeland across the world, was an act typical of the composite culture of South Asia; his response by giving a stranger the gift of a blurb for his book was an equally generous South Asian gesture. His excellent blurb graces the cover of my book: "Akbar Ahmed's book is in a great tradition of the greatest British administrators—Sir Alfred Lyall, Sir William Hunter, and Sir Denzil Ibbetson. Ahmed is also like them, an anthropologist administrator."

Another towering Indian intellectual and an ex-Supreme Court judge, V. R. Krishna Iyer, also reached out to me in this spirit of inclusive humanism. He reviewed my 1992 book

Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise thus: “Discovering Akbar Ahmed through his brilliant book *Discovering Islam* was my first experience ... Ahmed is, above all, human and so is his book. I am in love with both” (Iyer in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 November, 1992, Bombay.)

My next examples of the many at hand are of a Sikh and a Hindu. The former was my teaching assistant at American University. I asked her to reflect on our time together. “You have been a mentor, a friend and someone who has led me to view not only Islam, but my own religion, Sikhism, with a new perspective,” she responded. “With you I have learned to discover the commonalities of faith, and the embracing power of human bonding. Our discussions on Sufi Islam, the teachings of Guru Nanak, my time with you teaching the courses of the World of Islam and Judaism and Islam, all have demonstrated the powerful message of humanity, equality and justice that underlines each faith. Some of my fond memories with you include the time you said a prayer at Nankana Sahib, when my daughter was born and you sent me a photograph: the time when we walked into a mosque in DC, with our class of American University students, only to discover how divides dissolve across faiths, identities and culture.”

The other example is of my former undergraduate student. An American Indian Hindu, when she graduated from university in 2014 prior to her joining the University of Cambridge as a graduate student, she wrote me a scintillating farewell letter.

A senior colleague said if a professor gets this kind of letter from a student once in a life time they should consider themselves fortunate. Here are the last lines:

“Thank you, Dr. Ahmed for inspiring me. Thank you for encouraging me during moments when I doubted myself the most, smoothed over the bumps, and told me to stay true. I will be back to our fig tree soon, my friend. When I miss you, I will meet you between the stanzas of Rumi. I will meet you in autumn at Cambridge. I will meet you at the bottom of a glass of chai. I will meet you in grainy black and white photographs of brown brigadiers. I will meet you in old history books about civilization. I will meet you in my prayers. I will meet you in our eternal pursuit of *ilm*. I will meet you there. Yours Always and with my Deepest Respect and Gratitude, *Shanti* and *Salaams*.”

There are other examples of this spirit of affectionate inclusion : Srimati Kamala, the widely admired director of the Gandhi Center in Washington, DC, bestowing the inaugural Gandhi Peace Award on me; Manjula Kumar, celebrated Indian director at the Smithsonian taking up the challenge of successfully staging my plays with integrity and being taunted for promoting a Muslim author; and the renowned Indian Professor Julius Lipner, a pillar at Cambridge University, providing a glowing blurb for my academic book, *Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity*, which was part of my Jinnah Quartet which featured the movie *Jinnah*.

Conclusion

The interactions I have described are in keeping with the old spirit of nobility of the Indian and Pakistani soul inspired by the inclusive sages of the land like Lord Buddha, Asoka, Mahavira and Guru Nanak; and on the Muslim side Data Ganj Baksh, Shah Abdul Latif, Bulleh Shah, Moinuddin Chishti, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, and Allama Iqbal. They embraced all, promoted justice, and abhorred violence.

This is the spirit that inspired the modern Indian leaders Gandhi and Nehru and is in keeping with the vision that they had for India, and Jinnah had for Pakistan. If anyone doubts Jinnah's vision for Pakistan, they must listen to his first speeches to the Constituent Assembly in Karachi in 1947.

Both nations must understand that being cruel to their minorities is an act of cowardice and a sign of moral bankruptcy. It is indicative of a weak and failed polity. That is why the early founding fathers, Gandhi and Nehru in India, Jinnah and Liaqat in Pakistan, honored their minorities and reached out to show them support and promised protection. The test of civilization will always be how a majority treats its minority community.

When Siddhartha was a young boy, his father, an ambitious chief of the warrior caste, attempted to train him in the martial arts. Siddhartha categorically rejected war and violence of any kind and grew up to become Gautama Buddha. He promoted *shanti* or peace and practiced *ahimsa* or non-violence and created a world movement that is with us today. The genocide the Rohingya face is by those who have changed the very teaching of the Lord Buddha.

Mahatma Gandhi's genius was to take these concepts from ancient Indian history and promote them so that they became part of social and political discourse in South Asia and later across the world.

When India achieved independence in 1947, it had high status especially among the non-aligned movement; it reflected a mystique precisely because of the concepts of *shanti* and *ahimsa*. It is this legacy that is being set aside in such a cavalier manner over the last years.

Ironically, I see a glimmer of hope with the coronavirus. It was the common enemy and it was terrible enough to put the fear of God into all South Asians.

My suggestion is to appeal to the leaders and thinkers of both nations to understand the depth and urgency of the crisis. When Indians and Pakistanis look at each other they do so through a military-strategic prism; in order to avoid the madness they must change the paradigm and look at each other through a moral-humanist-philosophic prism. The two nations must share medical research with the pandemic in mind, exchange doctors and nurses as good will gestures and immediately tone down political and media attacks on each other. Indians must stop killing defenseless members of the minority. We are separate for less than a century, together for a millennium. Love begets love. Hatred kills. It is time for both to seriously consider turning a new leaf. In the absence of vaccines, a palliative exercise calculated to improve mental health during the pandemic is to reach out to family members and friends. Why not neighbors?

It would set the right tone if India, which is vastly bigger, took the lead.

My premise is simple. If India is to maintain, in this case regain, its status, it needs to very rapidly change course. Its leaders should eschew those with hatred in their hearts and genocide on their minds; they should be inspired by Lord Ram's righteous path, and noble Buddha's *ahimsa* or non-violence, the great Guru Nanak Devji's message of love, and the gentle Mahatma and his pursuit of *shanti* or peace. The leaders should rediscover the great Indian concepts of *ahimsa* and *shanti* as part of their policy. By realigning its position closer to the Gandhian ideal and to its own traditions of humanity going as far back as Lord Ram and the Buddha, India will have a double advantage; it will strengthen and reinforce its own identity and also reassure those South Asian neighbors who remain highly suspicious of its motivations.

The rediscovery is the first and most critical step. The next step is perhaps the most difficult one for Hindus and Muslims—to put aside our individual egos and confront the reality that we have caused deep pain to one another. We must acknowledge that pain. That can only happen with honest self-reflection.

If the putrid atmosphere of hatred can be cleared, then the next steps become easier: scholars, artists, sports figures, and writers must be invited from across the borders to promote mutual understanding (and can we please listen to each other without throwing bottles of ink). Seminars and conferences need to be held and political figures invited to take part and learn. Traders and businessmen must work together for mutual prosperity. None of these ideas are new or radical, yet none of them have been fully given a chance. To cite Mahatma Gandhi, to bring about change, become the change.

I am encouraged that beneath the bluster and hatred and violence there is still humanity. Hindus must never forget that the Quaid, while protecting a group of Hindus being attacked by Muslims in Karachi, declared himself, “the Protector General of the Hindu community in Pakistan” and in his first speeches to the Constituent Assembly guaranteed the security and religious freedom of the minorities in Pakistan; just as Muslims must never forget that Mahatma Gandhi gave his life protecting the rights of the Muslims. For the admirers of the Quaid, as indeed I am, we should appreciate that the Mahatma addressed Mr Jinnah with respect as Quaid-i-Azam.

In a few days both India and Pakistan will celebrate their independence day. What a great occasion to reflect on the journey made thus far and dream of creating a new and better world that strives to create true *shanti* and its Islamic equivalent *salaam* or peace in South Asia.