

## **The People Next Door: The Curious History of India's Relations with Pakistan**, by T.C.A. Raghavan, Noida:

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'The People Next Door' is the name of a 1968 television (TV) series made into a 1970 Hollywood movie, a 1996 TV film, a 2008 novel, again a 2016 TV film, and, in the case of the book being reviewed, a non-fiction historical book. When we spend time in observing neighbours, the act has a voyeuristic feel. A quote by the late Aleister Crowley, British magician and occultist, in the above-mentioned 2008 novel states, 'it is evidently consoling to reflect that the people next door are going to hell'.<sup>1</sup> However, Raghavan's book does not convey this negative aspect, which a reader may expect to find. On the contrary, it has a flash of the bonhomie that two neighbours can also have. In Raghavan's case, the name of the book is evocative of the enigma that is Pakistan—India's sibling with whom it has a love-hate relationship. When Indians and Pakistanis interact elsewhere in the world in their personal capacity, they embrace each other as long-lost brothers. When they come back to their respective countries, they re-enter a hostile relationship. This book seeks to parse the adversarial relationship between India and Pakistan, tracing its genesis from the birth of the two nations till the second year of the Narendra Modi government, because, as the author states in the epilogue using the words of K. Natwar Singh, 'The future lies in the past.'

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Raghavan was the Deputy High Commissioner and, later, High Commissioner in the Indian Embassy in Pakistan in two separate tenures of approximately eight years. He has also served as a Director in the office of the External Affairs Minister, and also at the Pakistan Desk at the Ministry of External Affairs, which gave him an insight into diplomacy at the highest levels. This makes him eminently suitable to write such a book.

The book has eight chapters besides the introduction and the epilogue. The introduction is very short, which goes with the author's statement that he has not introduced the book by going into the reasons why India–Pakistan history took the course that it did because 'I also take a great deal of knowledge of this history for granted.'

Chapter 1, 'Setting the Mould', and Chapter 2, 'Working Together?' cover the period from 1947 to 1960. This was a period when India–Pakistan relations were more benign as the personalities on either side, ranging from politicians to civil servants, were well known to each other. The author deliberately does not go into details of the prominent personalities because, as he states, the backgrounds and details of these people are well known. He embellishes his narrative with lesser-known people and interesting facts. History seen through the eyes and acts of these people provides a refreshing perspective. Chapters 3 and 4, titled 'Highs and Lows' and 'From One War to Another' respectively, take the story up to 1971 and the break-up of Pakistan. Chapter 5, 'Picking Up the Pieces', takes us from 1972 to 1979 when the Zia-ul-Haq era began. It ostensibly appeared to herald an era of peace in the apparent overtures by Zia, but in effect laid the foundation of radicalisation of the Pakistani Army and society. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's execution through a dubious trail and the entry of the Cold War actively into South Asia were the highlights of this period. Chapter 6, 'Dissidents and Crisis', covers the period 1980–89, when the Siachen battleground became active, an ugly militancy erupted in Indian Punjab, Indira Gandhi was assassinated, and, near the end of the period, so was Zia-ul-Haq. Chapter 7, 'Hopes for a Future in a Troubled Decade', covers the period 1990–99, a period of political instability in India on account of coalition governments, a full-blown insurgency in Kashmir and waning of the one going on in Punjab. It saw the traumatic hijacking of IC-814 and, at the end of the period, the re-election of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government in India. Chapter 8, 'A New Century but an Old Terrain', covers the history up to 2006, where the most striking personality was Parvez Musharraf; the

most landmark event, the Kargil War; and the most impactful event 9/11 and the subsequent United States (US)-led war in Afghanistan.

The book walks the reader through 70 years of Indian–Pakistan interactions, some benign but mostly hostile. Raghavan starts off with the events of the Partition period. We all are more aware of how the accession of Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad and Junagadh to India took place. Raghavan describes the differences and the diplomatic posturing that accompanied these three accessions, as also similar activity in respect to Kalat (Baluchistan) on the Pakistani side. The author laces his narrative with colourful personalities, interesting trivia and more serious historical events to educate us about the intense hostility, embellished with nostalgia, that repetitively appears in the India–Pakistan relationship. Very clearly, the nostalgic peaks are becoming lesser as the generation which saw a united India is almost gone. The author explains how deep hostility engenders suspicion about motives and, in the past two decades, has become more pronounced as minorities in Pakistan have reduced drastically, which has widened the religious divide.

Raghavan had a bird’s-eye view of that phase of Indo-Pakistan relations where Manmohan Singh made out-of-the-way efforts to break the logjam in relations; an initiative which came to naught after the 26/11 attack. His anecdotal narration and flowing prose make the 300-plus pages book reasonably easy to read. The book, as evident by the description, is broadly laid in a chronological order, with interesting characters of that era weaved into the narrative. For example, the book talks about a Dawood Ibrahim-type dacoit called ‘Bhupat Dakoo’ who, when wanted for 82 murders in Saurashtra, India, ran across to Pakistan in 1952 and posed as a pro-Pakistan patriot from Junagadh, thus securing sanctuary in Pakistan, à la Dawood. There are others like K.L. Gauba, a genuine sensationalist, and Tridev Roy, the Buddhist Raja of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who chose to move ‘in an opposite direction across the Radcliffe line’.

The title of the book, which is constantly referred to, and the style of narration, which is objective and unbiased, make this book a work which can be read by the Pakistani reader with equal interest to get a fair idea of ‘the people next door’ from their context. In this manner, the author avoids a one-sided history. Raghavan’s writing is balanced and does not indulge in chest-thumping rhetoric. His account of the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War brings out how humiliating it was for Pakistan and how at diplomatic fora, like the United Nations, Indian delegates were

instructed through Swaran Singh's foresight to not display triumphalism. This was to convey that India had no aggressive designs on Pakistan and was forced by circumstances of West Pakistan's making to intervene in East Pakistan.

Raghavan takes us back to an era when it was possible for thousands of Indians to go to Pakistan to watch a test match—something that is unthinkable today—and the Governor General of Pakistan, Malik Ghulam Muhammad, to be present at India's 1955 Republic Day celebrations as the chief guest. Raghavan discusses all the elements in the form of major events in the India–Pakistan relationship: the wars of 1948, 1965 and 1971 and the signing of the Tashkent Declaration and then the Shimla agreement. His narration brings out that by and large the political leadership of Pakistan, from Benazir Bhutto to Nawaz Sharif, favoured better relations with India, whereas the military leadership made a seemingly genuine effort only during the time of Parvez Musharraf and has otherwise always remained hostile. The military leadership also pulls up the civilian government should it show any inclination for de-freezing relations. The author further brings out that though helming a right-wing nationalistic (albeit coalition) government, it is Prime Minister Vajpayee who stands out in striving to obtain a lasting relationship with Pakistan. He did this first when he was the Minister for External Affairs in the Janata government in the period 1977–80 and then as the Prime Minister. He continued his efforts in spite of provocations, especially the perfidy of Kargil. The author has words of praise for Manmohan Singh, who in a quiet way tried to build upon what he inherited from Vajpayee in 2004. However, his efforts at Sharm El Sheikh floundered in the face of public anger, which had peaked nine months earlier when the 26/11 attack at Mumbai took place.

Raghavan's book provides us a clear understanding of the dynamics of India–Pakistan relations and is recommended to be read by those interested in an impartial history. The value of the book lies in its narration from 1947 up to 2007–08, when the twin major events of Benazir Bhutto's assassination and General Musharraf's resignation changed Pakistani politics. Raghavan breezes through the period after 2008, but this is acceptable because these events are not of as much value in a historical work as they are too recent to not be known to people and too fresh to be called history. The narration does convey the sense of *déjà vu* in Indo-Pakistan relations, which follow cycles of conciliatory moves and hawkish standoffs.

The book has been written with enthusiasm and is in an anecdotal style. The author is clear that he is writing a history of India–Pakistan relations and not a scholarly solution to the problems between the two countries. The prose is clear and flowing; there is no jargon and, for that matter, no jingoism. Raghavan has left the question of the future open. His excellent historical book brings home the necessary truth that in India–Pakistan relations, it is important to keep the events of the past in mind to deal with the present.

NOTE

1. Christopher Ransom, *The People Next Door*, London: Hachet Digital, 2011, p. ii.

