

# Islamabad to Delhi

by Bill Warden

*This article is a dispatch — or most of one — by a Canadian diplomat, currently seconded to the University of Calgary. Bill Warden was Ambassador to Pakistan from 1981-83 and High Commissioner to India from 1983-86. This is his vivid comparative account at the end of the second posting, of life in those two becoming-more-apart countries. It is printed here with the permission of the Department of External Affairs, to whom it was addressed.*

In the late summer of 1983 we moved from Islamabad to Delhi. An easier foreign service move it would have been difficult to imagine: simply a matter of stowing belongings and dogs in the stationwagon and tracing the route of the Moghuls, the Grand Trunk Road, for some 600 miles. A number of Canadian diplomats have served in both India and Pakistan. We were perhaps the first — certainly the first Head of Mission — to have made a direct switch. The following is an impressionistic account of service in these two populous countries where, in spite of much that is common in terms of history and culture, an enormous gulf still separates the two.

Pakistan in the early Eighties combined all the elements which titillate the diplomat: high political interest, with Afghanistan in the headlines and refugees surging into the country; the occasional tribal battle on the Northwest Frontier to liven up the scene; limitless possibilities for travel into territory virtually virgin in touristic terms; the foothills of the Himalayas on the doorstep providing relief from the torrid heat of the Punjabi plain; and best of all, a country where people, if they had heard of Canada were full of goodwill, and even if they had not were, right down to the simplest folk, unmatched in the hospitality offered to strangers.

## Pakistan impressions

The imagery generated by visits to farflung areas was kaleidoscopic: the wonder which is the Karakorum Highway cut into the treacherous mountains thousands of feet above the churning Indus and climbing suddenly to 16,000 feet and the Chinese border; the stark expanses of eastern Sind where the Thar and Rajasthan deserts merge and where the ubiquitous camel and the desert folk still refuse to pay much attention to the border; the trackless and unpeopled moonscape of Baluchistan stretching for hundreds of miles east to Iran; the feudal villages of interior

Sind where villagers must still seek their masters' permission to leave, where wives of the rich live cloistered lives behind high walls surrounded by their opulent dowry; the legendary tribal territory of the Northwest with its gun-toting population, into which the unwary and uninvited stranger ventures only at gravest peril.

Politics in Pakistan were intriguing, to put it mildly. A military dictatorship the country may have been, but it would be difficult to find another place, including Canada, where simple folk were politically so astute and aware. The BBC was a way of life from one end of the country to the other. Few had a clear idea of what democracy was, but they all wanted it. Khomeini was an attractive figure to many, not only the Shias, his most attractive trait being the dispatch with which he had shot the corrupt and given pride to the oppressed. The villages were populated with wise old men, all ready to pontificate in prime ministerial fashion on matters of local and global import. My biggest surprise in a Punjabi village far removed from the mainstream, was to have one illiterate fellow, when asked if he knew where Canada was, answer question with question: "Why has Canada stopped sending uranium to Pakistan?"

There are few borders in the world where mistrust and suspicion reign as absolutely as they do along the Indo-Pakistani frontier. Tales of spies, infiltrators, subversives are legion on both sides. To cross the border is a major undertaking even for the privileged breed of diplomats who are the only ones allowed to drive. Along the disputed ceasefire line in Kashmir skirmishes regularly occur, breaking the tedium of the almost forgotten but still active United Nations Military Observer Group.

Yet the bristling border, as we discovered on crossing it, was only one aspect of a relationship which had within it elements of love, hate, nostalgia, pain and promise. How many people in Delhi even today reminisce about their happy childhood in Sialkot, Lahore, Pindi and Peshawar? India's hundred million Muslims still have many close family ties with their coreligionists in Pakistan. What struck me sharply in Pakistan was the way Pakistanis would greet individual Indians as long-lost brothers, but reveal a visceral obsession with Indians in the collective. The same faces of Jekyll and Hyde revealed themselves in India.

The actual changing of the Ambassador's hat for that of High Commissioner [Pakistan had left the Commonwealth in 1978. Ed.] gave rise to curious sensations. Before departing Islamabad I felt instinctively as if I should somehow project my transfer to Delhi as something of a demotion. In Delhi on the other hand, when I would tell people