

Travelling Pakistan via Wagah Border: An experience to cherries!

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My first visit to Pakistan was in November 2016, not as a tourist but to attend the international conference organized by GCU (Government College University), Lahore. I didn't have many pre-conceived notions about the country and was indeed excited to see Pakistan very first time. Being a student and practitioner of International Relations from Nepal I always wanted to explore Pakistan. The visit was even more exciting because I was travelling via Wagah border. However, convincing my parents about the visit was difficult not just because I was travelling via border but also because surgical strike had lately taken place in Indo-Pak border after the Uri Attack and as expected the military situation was much tensed specially in the border lines. Given this tensed situation and incessant apprehensive news flooded by the Indian media these reactions were not surprising for me.



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A blissful experience of Golden Temple

I landed in Amritsar in the evening and spent overnight since the border was already closed. Getting free evening in Amritsar was an abundant occasion for me to visit the delightful Golden Temple that has always been in my bucket list. The Golden Temple in Amritsar is the holiest shrine of the Sikh region. This Temple has been destroyed many times and had been rebuilt again. The domes of the Temple are covered in gold. It is also known as Harmandir Sahib or Darbar Sahib.

Tightening the Bandana (Yellow headscarf), I stepped in and walked towards the temple admiring the glorious and bright marvel in front of me- Golden temple at night. I touched the holy water; the holy lake looked blissful as it glimmered under the golden lights. The chanting of holy words would certainly take anyone on a spiritual odyssey. Golden temple at night is certainly a treat for the eyes and soul. The peaceful temple, which represents Amritsar for travelers, is highly revered by the Sikh community. The influx of devotees starts early morning and continues till 10 pm. After admiring the wisdom of the jubilantly lit temple and offering prayers to the almighty, I received *Langar* (meal) as *Prasad*. On average around 200,000 people are fed everyday by the commendable efforts of hundreds over volunteers at Golden Temple. The number is not only astounding but also reaffirms faith in a principle of humanity; the principle of selfless dedication of one human for another being, just to ensure that a co-existing individual of society doesn't go to bed with an empty stomach and a heavy heart.

Visiting Golden Temple at night was a truly mesmerizing experience. I was not only impressed by the glow of golden lights and marvelous cheerfulness, but also inspired by the efforts invested by the volunteers. They were not serving for any recognition or praise for their deeds. They just believe in generosity and serving humanity.



Towards the border

Next morning I was eager to head as early as possible to the Wagah border to solve any issues I was worried might arise. I hailed a cab and sat in eager anticipation during the 45-minute drive. As I pulled into the Attari Integrated Check Post, my passport and visas were verified. The taxi driver's license was held before I was allowed to enter. I had meticulously prepared backup documents: duplicates of invitation letters, passport copies, photos; anything I could think of, the absence of which might justify rejecting my crossing. I held my breath at each step, worried that a wrong answer or a misstep would get me denied entry. Although the security was thorough, every single person I spoke with was courteous and professional, on both sides. After a couple of questions and formalities in the immigrations both sides, I stepped on the Pakistan side of the Wagah border. A shower of warm welcome by the Pakistani friends, who had come to receive me at the border, was something I had definitely not expected.

A city about which famed Urdu writer Kashmiri Lal Zakir had said, "*Jinne Lahore naivekhya wotejamiya hi naiee (those who haven't seen Lahore they haven't yet been born)*", after visiting Lahore I realized what the poet said was indeed true. The cultural center of Pakistan, Lahore has been ruled by a number of great empires. Arguably, it reached its peak under the Mughal Empire, before the Sikh Empire was centered and more recently the British Empire, before partition and Pakistan's self-rule since 1947. Each empire has left their mark on the city and, in architectural terms at least, the city is the richer for it. Wandering around the major city-sites is like strolling along timeless history. The city is also the most cosmopolitan in Pakistan, a liberal and creative hub where 'Lollywood' the Pakistani film scene, is based.

Visiting Government College University

Once I reached to the GCU, one of the oldest educational institutions in Pakistan established in 1864 with rich history and academic records since British time including alumni network of two Nobel Prize laureates Abdus Salam and Har Gobind Khorana, as well as philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, World Court President Muhammad Zafarullah Khan, four prime ministers of Pakistan and globally renowned scholars, my perception about Pakistan's educational system got changed. The institution's size, demography, building architecture, numbers of different academic departments, libraries structure and much more gave me different experience than what I had seen back home. Never being colonized by external empires, we often don't get to see similar academic institutions including teaching methods and architecture in Nepal.



Lahore: A city filled with cultures and heritages

As a part of the conference, I also had opportunity of sightseeing Lahore. Apart from listening to the prominent scholars from different parts of the world at the conference, getting opportunity to explore the city's historical and cultural assets was the exceptional experience in a different level. My first sightseeing was *Badshahi Mosque*; an amazing piece of Mughal architecture built during 1671-1673 AD by Emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir. It is one of the largest mosques in the world that can accommodate almost 100,000 worshippers at a time. It is certainly a majestic construction that transports us back to the time of Empires gone by.



Another must visit treasure of Lahore that not only left me wondered with its rich Persian architecture and interior but also enriched with historical knowledge was *Lahore Fort (Shahi Qila)*. The former residence and legacy of the Mughal dynasty, UNESCO-protected Lahore Fort captivates for its monumental beauty and the mystery surrounding it. Although the fort flourished under Emperor Akbar of the Mughal dynasty, its origins extend as far back as the 11th century. Few more incredible attractions of the fort either that was *Sheesh Mehal* decorated with thousands of all sizes mirrors, or a brightly lit shimmering white marble mosque known as *Moti Masjid*, or *Naulakha Pavilion* built by King Akbar or *Alamgiri Gate* built under the patronage of Emperor Aurangzeb all of them made my visit truly unforgettable.



Wagah Border, where patriotism echoes

Lahore trip cannot be completed without a trip to the Wagah border. Wagah is about half an hour drive outside of Lahore and it is known for being the only open Indo-Pak border at present time. Since I was returning back home from Wagah, I was certainly excited to see the military parade at the border. The synchronized military 'show' that takes place every day at the Wagah border is something that cannot be simply explained. It was carnival atmosphere at the Border- cars and buses loaded with people arrived there on a biting cold November evening cheerfully ignoring the tiny drizzle, not allowing it to dampen the spirit. There were face painters demanding that spectators get their faces painted with the country flag, hawkers selling CDs and postcards of the ceremony; people were streaming in by the hundred, waving flags; everyone seemed to be enjoying fullest.

Grandstands set up on either side of the border are filled with crowds chanting PAKISTAN on one side and HINDUSTAN on the other. Both military teams start by singing anthems and displays of force and superiority. Who can raise their legs highest, who can yell the loudest, who can blow the horn the longest is something worth watching. During the sunsets, the flags are lowered, two main soldiers from both sides shake hands and the gates are officially closed among much fanfare and an incredible display of strength and patriotism of the military on both parts. Even the non-Urdu/Hindi speakers and foreigners can feel the intensity and the patriotism that floats in the air.



Returned with beautiful memories and different perception

All in all, the conference at the CGU had changed the international delegates' perception towards Pakistan, especially from India and other parts of South Asia. Things in Pakistan won't change overnight but a mere visit does shatter many misconceptions. Young delegates from South Asia had positive feelings and warmth for Pakistan, for Pakistanis and for this region, exactly why I thought that conference was successful. Terror attacks intensifying in some parts of Pakistan cannot be ignored but does that mean that a small population is a representative of the 200 million Pakistanis doing amazing things within and outside the country? Certainly not!

If one has ever been to Pakistan, S/he would know that the so called 'truth' we talk about is pretty far from the truth. The media has painted the country in an unfortunate light, a fact most Pakistanis are painfully aware of. I have been to Pakistan thrice and wherever I went, I was greeted by friendly faces, warm love and incredibly helpful human beings. It's time we stop judging the people with their nationality and religion. It's time to enjoy the rich socio-cultural diversity this region has to offer and embrace humanity with head held high. Our soils are parted, let's not part our souls.