

Crossing the Borders That Divide

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I want to take you right back to 2005, when I was growing up in Kerala, the southernmost state of India, enjoying the rural life among paddy fields, tamarinds, mangoes and of course, schools. Schools are a big part of my memory because they shaped my patriotism. I was proud of India its diversity, its resilience, its strength. I loved learning history, geography, and politics. To me, it was all happy stories of culture except when it came to war. On the enemy side, of course, were the British, the larger Western world, and especially Pakistan.

I don't know why, but as a child I felt more hatred toward Pakistan than toward the British. At least I had seen white people in schools and as tourists. In fact, the school I studied in was run by a British family. But with Pakistan, it was different, they felt like aliens to me. They were up in the north, far away, and at that young age I had no idea what they even looked like. Cricket, though, is an emotion in my country. We used to eagerly look forward to India-Pakistan matches, and I would shout my lungs out whenever India won. For me, it was like winning a world war every single time.

Years later, I received admission to study in Bangladesh. On my very first day, I walked into a classroom where chairs were arranged in a circle, not rows. I took a seat, anxious to make conversation but curious enough to keep an open mind. We began with introductions, going around the circle. One by one, students introduced themselves: from Afghanistan, Syria, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and then me. And then the next person said, *"Hi everyone, my name is Tannaz, and I am from Gilgit, Pakistan."*

I cannot explain what happened in that moment. My head just turned toward her instantly, as if in a flash. It was like a child seeing a moving toy for the first time. My heart was racing with emotions. I listened carefully to every word she spoke—her accent was different, her skin was lighter, she was beautiful. She wore a salwar very similar to what I wore, and she spoke Hindi and Urdu. I spoke Hindi too.

The class that day was world history, but what I really learned was how stories change depending on who tells them. It was the first time I heard history narrated from five different perspectives. But the person I connected to the most was Tannaz, my Pakistani classmate. Despite everything I had once been taught, she and I were so similar. We became the closest of friends. Today, I feel Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are my brothers and sisters; the map's lines are the only thing dividing us.

Now, if you ask me about my bucket list, visiting Pakistan is one of my biggest dreams. I want to hug her and walk the mountains and valleys she described so vividly. It amazes me that I once hated a land and people I had never known only to later feel so deeply connected to them. It still pains me how human-made boundaries keep people apart. When I look at conflicts today, my heart often aches. Because I know if people could just sit in a circle together, sharing their stories as humans first, then hatred would lose its power. For me, it took only one friendship to break the wall I carried for years.

I've been blessed to study and travel across Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Nepal, and now the USA. And each place left its mark on me. In Korea, I learned the humility of bowing to show respect. In Bangladesh, I picked up the habit of saying "Masha'Allah" when something good happens. From Nepal, I absorbed the reverence for traditions; from Sri Lanka, their hospitality; and in the USA, the courage of open conversations. These small cultural threads have stitched themselves into who I am, making my heart larger with every encounter.

And so, when I look at the world today with its divisions, hatred, and violence, I hold on to what I've seen: that walls do fall, and hearts do open. My heart goes out to victims of violence across the world, and I often wish those in conflict had a chance like I did, to sit with their so-called "enemies," to see their souls, the human in them, and love them. Just as I now love my Pakistani friend

** This essay was edited for grammar and style using ChatGPT, an AI language tool