

Down
ALL OVER THE
USA
PLACE
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By Omar Kureishi

LAST week the BBC aired a documentary on the plight of Pakistanis living in the United States. It made my blood boil. These were decent, God-fearing people who had got caught up in events not of their making, even remotely, and whose lives had been shattered by a fear-driven bigotry that found legal validity in either new laws or old ones stretched to the limits of absurdity.

There was something Kafkaesque about it and altogether unworthy of a country that owes its greatness to its own rich immigrant past.

I thought how different it had been when I had studied at the University of Southern California. My book about those days, *As Time Goes By*, was an upbeat, thumbs-up account even though the shadow of McCarthy had fallen on the landscape. I was a child of the last days of the British Raj and to be in a free country was something that I treasured. I had been an outspoken student and never afraid to speak my mind and rather than be persecuted or hounded, I was honoured and was made a member of Blue Key, a national fraternity of outstanding student leaders.

Shutting doors on Pakistanis

There was a race clause in its membership rules. Blue Key kept out the Afro-Americans. Outraged by this as were other members of our chapter, I was sent to Chicago for Blue Key's annual convention and I led the movement to have the race clause removed. "I want to go back home and tell my countrymen how wonderful America was but what if they asked me about Blue Key? How could I explain that its doors were shut to some Americans because of their race?" I had said in my speech or words to that emotive effect.

I had written a scathing article in *The Christian Monitor* about McCarthyism. I had criticised it on a television and radio programme. I had said that McCarthyism posed a greater moral danger than communism. And I wondered as I watched the BBC documentary what would have been my fate in the present climate of fear. Would I have been one of the passengers on the "pneloads" of Pakistanis who have been deported for some minor infraction of immigration rules, some so minor that they make a traffic offence seem like a felony.

But an even more dangerous development is the delay/denial of student visas. I was sent a copy of a statement issued by the Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America (APPNA). It raises the concern that "the doors of higher education are being shut to Pakistani physicians in United States." It makes depressing reading. Here are some extracts: "Of the total 1133 J1 visas for physicians approved by Education Council for Foreign Medical

Graduates (ECFMG) in 2003, Pakistan remained on top with securing 154 of them with India closely trailing behind with 142. While this news is a source of pride for every Pakistan it also has a depressing side as well. Only 33% of these individual were able to join their residencies on time as opposed to 60% of Indians and 80% of overall physicians.

"Of 154 Pakistani physicians seeking J - 1 visas for first-year residency positions in 2003, only 40 arrived on time, 12 were one to 14 days late, 24 came within 30 days, and 42 were more than a month late. Data from ECFMG suggest no other country had 42 residents who were more than a month late. The remaining 36 could not arrive in US and therefore their residency contracts were cancelled. This number of 21% was much more than the 6% of Indian Physicians, who had a similar fate. It's apparent that this change in political climate has been particularly punitive for physicians from Pakistan".

This year again, the Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America has been contacted by numerous physicians who have been denied entry into the United States. Some of them are physicians trying to come to the US in order to take the Clinical Skills Assessment test, which IMGs are required to pass before participating in the Match. Others were denied visas to the United States after successfully securing residences here after having completed an exhaustive process of taking the required exams and interviews".

This is a strange kind of bigotry. To shut its doors to young men and women who want to go to the United States for higher education is not to make the United States safe from terrorism. The world will only be safe when it is free of fear. To an extent it was understandable that immediately after 9/11, there should be this across-the-board putting down of shutters and because terrorism was a faceless enemy, like an epidemic of an unknown disease, precautions of the strictest kind could have been justified.

But a lot of time has elapsed and the shock-effect of 9/11 should have worn off. America's strength may come from its military but its greatness comes from its Bill of Rights and from the values it enshrines. The highest form of patriotism comes from defending these values. Without them, America would be just another country. Its military might protects its shores but not its soul.

Terrorism is everyone's war. Those very Pakistanis whose visas are being delayed or denied could easily be its victims for most of the victims of terrorism are innocent men, women and children. Why should they be twice punished? The stereotyping of Pakistanis as potential terrorists is an outrage as is the rampant anti-Americanism. Both are the products of a closed mind.

The Statue of Liberty, the lady who lifts a lamp besides golden door was once a shining symbol. There is the danger that it might just become a tourist attraction. American should go back to being Americans, not global warriors.