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Interestingly, a domestic controversy, removed from politics, arose in this period which threw an interesting light on Indo-Pak relations. In the realm of culture, or rather entertainment, India dominates Pakistan to the exclusion of American influence. Pakistanis, particularly the urban middle class (but including aspirants from the lower classes as well), love American clothes and accessories, and regard American fast food and soft drinks as manna from heaven. They do not ignore American music, American movies and American TV, but their first loyalty remains to their Indian equivalents. Thus, the cable operators went to the unprecedented extent of going on strike for four days to demand permission for the lifting of a ban imposed some months ago on the screening of Indian satellite channels.

This is not ideological. The cable operators are not committed to spreading Indian propaganda. Their demand did not include broadcasting Indian news channels, just certain entertainment channels, which fall into three broad categories: movie channels, drama serial channels and music channels. Of course, since Bollywood dominates Indian entertainment, and music dominates Bollywood, there are significant crossovers. The basic message from the cable operators was that their subscriptions were not being renewed since the ban. Even if one excludes the Hungarian, Russian, Turkish, French, Italian and German channels, and even without the Indian channels, there is enough variety supplied by cable operators to satisfy the need for entertainment of the average educated Pakistani. Yet households in all major cities are disconnecting. Why?

While Hollywood movies are technically far superior, and sometimes even markedly more intelligent and realistic, Bollywood movies are more to the Pakistani taste. However, Lollywood movies are atrocious, so Pakistani viewers naturally prefer Bollywood fare. Lollywood is disadvantaged by a much smaller mar-

ket, which means not enough resources are devoted to what is quite a major enterprise.

But let us delve deeper. Why is Bollywood more acceptable? The same language for one, which means that verbal humour translates very easily, for example. It is an open secret that some of Bollywood's most successful screenplay writers were Muslims, who wrote Urdu rather than Hindi. The themes and social contexts depicted in Indian movies are familiar to Pakistani audiences. Therefore, they are more acceptable. This applies with equal force to their TV serials (whose production values are not particularly better, and are perhaps worse, than their Pakistani counterparts): the most popular Indian TV-series are those dealing with the problems of joint families, just as they do in Pakistani serials. However, no Pakistani serial has developed into one of those meandering Indian serials, which apparently go on forever, running into several half-hour hundred episodes. Another intriguing difference is that no Pakistani serial is complete without the Sindhi or Seraiki wadera, while the Indian equivalent is the Khatri or Banya business magnate.

Pakistani singers copy more Indian songs, but some of them are honoured by imitation. Actually, the cross-fertilisation has been almost continuous. Pakistan imported Indian films until 1965, and after Doordarshan Amritsar start broadcasting in 1973, there has been uninterrupted access to Indian popular entertainment since then, whether via VCRs, satellite dishes or cable. The ban was disruptive, but the public has dusted off its old VCRs, bought dishes and decoders, and is settling down happily to viewing the latest Bollywood junk.

Is this a cultural invasion? While Pakistan and (North-West) India might superficially share the same culture, they are actually mirror images, not identical. The language of the street might be the same Hindustani, but where Urdu looks to a rich Perso-Arabic tradition, Hindi looks to an equally rich (but very different) Sanskrit tradition. Both cultures acknowledge caste, but whereas in India it is an emotive and highly politicised concept, in Pakistan it is fading into oblivion as a meaningful social marker. (Caste is not to be confused with clan or biradari, which is alive and well in Pakistan.) Hindus and Muslims shared a history, but were on opposing sides of it; ate differently, and lived differently. They occupied the same space, and there were no doubt cordial personal relationships, based on a common humanity, across the divide, but the divide was there.

Some Indians might object that India is a secular state, but it is inescapably Hindu-majority, just as Pakistan is Muslim-majority. Its culture, especially its mass media, will therefore reflect majority values. It is true that it is not suitable for Pakistani audiences to be so addicted to Indian entertainment, because the sharp media practitioners there have clearly tried to manipulate this (the message of certain films, mostly about Partition or alleged Pakistani terrorism, is clearly designed for Pakistani audiences). But banning Indian cable is not a solution, because Pakistanis are going to watch anyhow. Similarly, refusing to talk to Pakistan does not solve India's Kashmir problem, as it will not deter the Kashmiri people in their freedom struggle. And of course, neither side can dig a 50-foot trench, no matter how much they might want to. E-mail queries and comments to: maniazi@nation.com.pk

At penpoint

Mirror images

BY M.A. NIAZI

In the late 1980s, commenting on whether Pakistan would ultimately look West to the Middle East or East to South Asia, an American expert once said in Lahore: "I'm sure most Pakistanis would like to dig a 50-foot trench along the border with India and then try to forget about it, but it's not possible."

This has never been better illustrated by recent developments in this area. Whereas the domestic focus remains the LFO controversy, and the international focus is towards the West, both distant (Washington) and near (Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel), a crucial development has taken place without much fanfare, but of more importance in terms of impact than any of the others. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has strangled his own child by declaring the peace process he initiated on April 18 more or less dead. In both cases, he chose with neat symbolism Srinagar as the venue for his announcement.

The USA is too far away for it to be Pakistan's most important relationship, even in this age of instant communication and globalisation. The USA is Pakistan's largest export market, and biggest source of remittances, apart from the political relationship, but it is just too far away to have an immediate impact on Pakistan. It certainly looms large, and US interventions have created all three major international issues now engaging Pakistani public attention. Afghanistan has not been stable for a quarter of a century, but the latest bout is directly related to the presence of US forces in Afghanistan and their operations against Taliban and Al-Qaeda remnants; the request for troops in Iraq has come from the USA, and the debate over recognising Israel originates from a desire to placate the USA.

Yet Pakistan's most important bilateral relationship remains with India, and within this relationship the core issue is Kashmir. It is impossible to dig that trench, even psychologically, because of the unresolved Kashmir dispute. Indeed, one reason for Pakistan's courting of the USA is the forlorn hope that somehow, someday, it might intervene on its side in the Kashmir dispute, and obtain a settlement. It would be unfair to say that Vajpayee's April 18 initiative passed unheeded in Pakistan. It generated a whole series of debates over various issues, and it sparked off a series of high-profile exchanges of delegations. But at the end of the day, the only thing that had happened was the re-appointment of High Commissioners and the resumption of the Lahore-Delhi bus service. This did not even bring matters back to Square One, where they had been in January 2002, when India commenced a 10-month military standoff, for air links and overflight rights remain suspended as does the Lahore-Delhi train service. Indeed, the talks on resuming overflights and air links broke down just before Vajpayee declared that talks with Pakistan could not take place until normalcy was restored in Kashmir, which more or less means never.

This is unfortunate for Pakistan, because it means that for the foreseeable future, its most important



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