FAKE AGGRESSION, TRUE EXCITEMENT

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THE DAILY "BACK-AND-FORTH" CEREMONY AT WAGAH BORDER

MUHAMMAD USMAN & HANS HARDER

A site of both peaceful co-existence and violent bloodshed, the Wagah section of the border between India and Pakistan has emerged as an arena in which cultural, political and religious ideas about nationhood play out to this day. Since the Partition of India in 1947, the Wagah border crossing has seen a constant back and forth of people, goods and ideas. Today, it is the site of an extraordinary spectacle: the so-called Wagah Border Ceremony. During this highly ritualized display, paramilitary soldiers on both sides of the border march towards and away from each other, capturing the complex relationship between India and Pakistan in a delicate choreography. Research conducted at Heidelberg University focuses on how the enmity between the two nation states is staged during the ceremony and in what way it might quite paradoxically also conjure ideas of friendly competition.

Suppose you are visiting Delhi and feel like going for a weekend trip to see Amritsar, known for the famous 16th c. Golden Temple of the Sikhs. Your hotel staff will put you in touch with a travel agent, who will arrange for an overnight bus tour. Amritsar, literally the "lake of ambrosia", is a middle-sized city in the Indian side of the Punjab, the "land of five rivers" just south of the western Himalaya, some 500 km from Delhi. Your one-day package trip will take you to the closely connected hotspots of touristic interest in that historic place: the Golden Temple and its compound itself, the newly designed Amritsar heritage walk, Jallianwala Bagh (the site of the eponymous massacre where a British colonel had hundreds of unarmed Indian protesters killed in 1919) and the recently opened Partition Museum. Plus – and this plus has become a must of unparalleled popularity in recent years – you will inevitably visit the so-called Wagah Border Ceremony.

Borders can be of touristic interest. We may remember the viewing points along the barbed wire of the German-German border, or the elevated platforms in West Berlin to peep across the Berlin Wall. Today, the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) between North and South Korea draws tourists to catch binocular glimpses of the other side. But the Wagah Border Ceremony, held every day in the late afternoon at the border crossing between Amritsar in India and Lahore in Pakistan, surpasses all those liminal border experiences by far.

A stadium and a spectacle

That's true for the spatial arrangements on the spot. What we see on site in Wagah hardly resembles viewing platforms but compares more readily to a stadium – or actually two adjacent stadiums: one on the Indian and one on the Pakistani side of the border, with the border itself as the mirroring axis. As you sit amongst thousands of daily Indian visitors in this arena, you face and actually see a similar viewing public on the other, the Pakistani side – and vice versa. Rare indeed are occasions where an Indian and a Pakistani crowd come to directly face each other, and that again across what is one of the fiercest borders on the planet.

As for the spatial arrangements, so for the soundscape. The volume level increases as you walk the last stretches from the bus and auto-rikshaw parking spots towards the border crossing, and reaches folk fair dimensions once you enter the arena. Bollywood film songs blast from huge loudspeakers; on the Indian side, a female crowd dances to the tunes on the ground where the ceremony is about to happen; on the Pakistani side, volunteer entertainers fire up the crowd by beating drums and skillfully moving the flag; and the whole thing becomes entirely interactive once the ceremony masters on both sides take up their microphones.

Roaring sound waves of nationalist slogans alternate: "Jīve Jīve Pākistān" or "Pākistān Zindābād" (approx. "Long Live Pakistan" or "Victory to Pakistan") versus "Bhārat Mātā kī Jay" ("Victory to Mother India"). Some of these slogans bear more or less explicitly religious connotations, such as the Hindu-connoted "Vande Mātaram" ("Bow to the Mother") on the Indian side, and the Islamic "Na'ra-e-Takbīr" ("Cry regarding the Magnificence [of God"]) or "Na'ra-e-Risālat" ("Cry regarding [Muhammad's] Prophethood") on the Pakistani side. The motto is: which side can acoustically outdo the other?

But all this is just by way of prelude. The real spectacle starts when the border guards in their ceremonial attire – uniforms, turbans, swords and all – enter their respective grounds. The competition is no longer about which audience can scream louder, but whose soldiers can raise their feet higher as they march: ideally above their heads to the tips of their turbans. And the latent aggression of the sloganeering feels much more real as the lead guards on both sides, after some back-and-forth choreography, goose-step towards one another as if to attack, with grim, belligerent facial expressions. This type of mock aggression, finally dissolving into military greetings and the closing of the iron border gates, is accompanied by deafening roars from the Indian and Pakistani audiences, representing two nation states that have been separated since 1947 and caught in an antagonistic relationship ever since.

A hastily drawn borderline

What we refer to here as the Wagah border is part of the 3,300-km-long boundary between India and Pakistan, today a thoroughly fenced and militarized line running from the Indian Ocean up to Kashmir, where it meets the so-called Line of Control that continues for another 750 km up to China. The border's high-level illumination makes it one of the very few human artifacts on earth that are visible on large-scale satellite photographs. It is presently rated as one of the most dangerous borders in the world.

This border, and certainly the Wagah section of it, is not a "natural" border delimited by rivers or mountain ranges. It is an entirely artificial construction that was drawn across the map by British rulers in 1947 to divide India in the course of granting independence to the country, and as a resolution of political conflict. Amritsar and Lahore, now separated by the border, were not just neighboring cities. They were twin cities whose origins are deeply intertwined. They grew together and had very strong business and family ties with each other.

It was the so-called Radcliffe Award, a hastily executed bureaucratic measure with cataclysmic effects, that resulted in the present-day border situation. Cyril Radcliffe, a prominent British lawyer and bureaucrat, headed the two commissions that drew up the boundaries between India and Pakistan. Radcliffe himself had no former experience of India and came there for the first time in 1947, just a few weeks before the end of British rule and the Partition. The members of the commissions were jurists and had no knowledge of borders, cartography or territorial details. The reliance on census data to identify Muslim majority districts to be assigned to Pakistan and Hindu majority ones to India did not make for a smooth transition into the emerging independent states; and the lack of additional surveys and field visits didn't equip the border commissions to tackle what we may call the territorial ambiguity on the ground.

Back and forth: people

When investigating past and present border dynamics, this notion of territorial ambiguity opens a window to look at the Punjab border and its back-and-forth patterns before and even after Partition. On 14 and 15 August 1947, the Day of Independence for Pakistan and India, respectively, it was not generally known in the region which districts would be on the Indian side and which would be part of Pakistani territory. For a good number of places, it remained uncertain for weeks after the event of Partition which side of the border they would end up on. Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Firozpur and even Lahore were examples of disputed regions to be divided.

This caused havoc as people on both sides found themselves in no-man's-land, unsure of which nation they would belong to in future. Rampant rumors pushed some of them to what was allegedly Pakistani territory, until after a while other news came in and caused them to move back. In such cases, the uncertainty of the actual border resulted quite literally in a back-and-forth of people. Trains were crossing the Wagah border towards Pakistan, but it was uncertain whether they would make it back to India. Some people even thought that the Partition was just a temporal political decision, and that they would be able to move back to their places after some time.

Back and forth: a saintly tomb

Back-and-forth shifts created massive uncertainties that also made it into spheres of symbolic representation. The popular story of a Sufi shrine epitomizes those oscillations quite neatly. According to a well-known narrative, the tomb of Sānjhā Pīr, literally "the common saint", moved back and forth across the Wagah border at the time of Partition. Devotees and pilgrims reported that when the border line was in the making, the shrine of this Muslim saint was supposed to be in the territory the Border Commission allotted to India. Spiritually, however, it remained tied to the Muslims of the other side. Therefore, according to the legend, it was miraculously moved to the Pakistani side of the border overnight. The next morning, however, the authorities allocated it to Indian territory again. The tomb was marked as belonging to India and the border line was drawn, but as night fell, the tomb once more made its way back to Pakistan.

After this supposed miracle, it was decided that the shrine had to be part of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, but one door should be open for Indian devotees to visit and acquire spiritual strength, because the divine site was felt to be common heritage and a treasure for all people regardless of caste, culture and religion. The shrine is situated in the vicinity of Wagah – directly on the Pakistani side of the so-called Zero Line, a 10-meter-wide stretch of clearance between the fields, and about 160 meters away from the fences built on Indian territory. The shrine's main gate opens on the Pakistani side, and at the back, Indian territory starts – though presently this is more in theory than in practice. Before fences were put up in 1986, devotees used to come forward to visit the shrine and then go back to India, but afterwards, the sealed border made this location inaccessible for Indians.

Wagah: from patrolling territory to stadium

But back to Wagah, and some remarks on its history. What is today the high-profile Wagah border checkpoint is located on the Grand Trunk Road, the historic connection between Kabul in the northwest and Dhaka in the east of the subcontinent. It is the only passage in the whole of Punjab province allowing international visitors and locals to cross the border. Just as much as a physical gateway, Wagah is also a symbolic gate to the past and the Partition between India and Pakistan, triggering agonizing memories of migration, violence and bloodshed. Many incidents of massive communal violence between members of the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities took place at or near this border.

Wagah has come a long way from a virtually unmarked border post to the present-day event site. On 11 October 1947, about two months after Partition, Brigadiers Nazir Ahmad from the Pakistani side and Mohindar Singh Chopra from the Indian side were appointed to patrol the border and regulate migration. At that time, there were not even pillars and markers on the ground to designate the border lines. The two brigadiers were friends and had worked together before Partition. They fixed the point and used stones and whitewashed drums to mark the border. Tents were pitched and sentry boxes were painted with the Tents were pitched and sentry boxes were painted with the colors of the national flags.. At the time of the 1948 Indo-Pakistani war in Kashmir, this border remained peaceful, and both brigadiers were appreciated and promoted for their commitment to peaceful relations.

With the passage of time, bilateral trade gained momentum, railway lines between the countries were reconnected, and thus the importance of this border increased. Both countries deployed their special forces – the BSF (India's Border

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Security Force) and the PR (Pakistan Rangers) – to guard the border. In 1959, daily military practice started, with the official purpose of lowering the national flags and closing the gates for the night. In subsequent years, it gradually developed into the spectacle it now is, with its own blend of militarism, nationalism, religion, indigenous culture, mass entertainment and – not to forget – masculinity.

Gender, religion, ideology

The "Javāns" (young soldiers) who are appointed to Wagah are recruited for their masculine qualities like musculari-ty, long moustaches, height and assertive behavior. Their provocative expressions in the Wagah border choreography are key to attracting the attention of the spectators. They proclaim "mardānā bharak", a type of particularly masculine utterance in Punjabi culture, to challenge their rivals, and show their open hands or "panjā", literally claws, in provoca-tive, often improvised gestures to dominate their counter-parts in the ceremony.

Religious overtones are conspicuous; thus, one of the per-formers on the Pakistani side stated in an interview with author Muhammad Usman:

"When I see a 'Kāfir' (non-Muslim, infidel) in the field in front of me, some metaphysical power emerges from my faith [and takes hold of me], and I perform well."

The spectacle certainly doesn't lack ideological messages of the nationalist type either, as is obvious from the slogans used to fire up the crowds. The same can be gleaned from the inscriptions at the gate: the one on the way to Pakistan bears the Persian epithet "Bāb-e-āzādī", "door to free-dom", and India welcomes visitors with a signboard in four languages (Hindi, Punjabi in Gurmukhi script, English and

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GESPIELTE AGGRESSION, ECHTE BEGEISTERUNG

EIN TÄGLICHES VOR UND ZURÜCK: DIE ZEREMONIE AN DER WAGAH-GRENZE

MUHAMMAD USMAN & HANS HARDER

Die Grenze zwischen Indien und Pakistan gilt als eine der gefährlichsten Grenzen der Welt, denn seit der Teilung Indiens 1947 stehen sich die beiden unabhängigen Staaten feindlich gegenüber. Drei Kriege, umstrittene Ansprüche auf das geteilte Kaschmir und politische Schuldzuweisungen haben zu einer 3.300 Kilometer langen eingezäunten und militarisierten Grenze sowie zu einer 750 Kilometer langen, noch stärker militarisierten und bis heute unruhigen Kontrolllinie in Kaschmir geführt.

Der wichtigste der wenigen Grenzübergänge zwischen beiden Ländern ist Wagah im Punjab, bekannt vor allem für seine tägliche Torschlusszeremonie: Dabei marschieren in einer hochgradig ritualisierten militärischen Darbietung Soldaten auf beiden Seiten der Grenze aufeinander zu und wieder voneinander weg. Als Touristenattraktion für Einheimische wie auch für internationale Besucher hat sich Wagah zu einer (nationalen) Bühne entwickelt, auf der sowohl Pakistan als auch Indien ihre nationale Identität zur Schau stellen: Mit gespielter Aggression und echter Begeisterung imitieren und spiegeln sie sich gegenseitig.

Als Ort der Massenmigration, des Blutvergießens und der Gräueltaten während der katastrophalen Teilung von 1947 ist Wagah aufgeladen mit historischer, nationalistischer und religiöser Bedeutung. Die extravagante Zurschaustellung von Nationalismus in der so mitreißenden wie verstörenden militärisch-kulturellen Massenveranstaltung machen es zu einem höchst ambivalenten Ort. Zur Entschlüsselung dieses sehr eigenartigen Phänomens bedarf es interdisziplinärer Forschung – eine Aufgabe, der sich Wissenschaftler am Graduiertenkolleg „Ambivalente Feindschaft“ widmen. ●

MUHAMMAD USMAN befasst sich seit Herbst 2023 als Doktorand am Heidelberger Graduiertenkolleg „Ambivalente Feindschaft“ mit der Zeremonie an der Wagah-Grenze. Betreut wird die Dissertation von seinem Co-Autor Prof. Dr. Hans Harder vom Südasien-Institut der Universität Heidelberg sowie von Prof. Dr. Jamal Malik von der Universität Erfurt. An Jamal Maliks Lehrstuhl für Islamwissenschaft hatte Muhammad Usman nach Abschlüssen in Pakistan und den USA mit einem Stipendium des Deutschen Akademischen Austauschdiensts (DAAD) 2021 zu promovieren begonnen.

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„Die Ungewissheit über den tatsächlichen Grenzverlauf führte buchstäblich zu einem Hin und Her von Menschen.“

Urdu) that reads "India the Largest Democracy in the World Welcomes You".

But all this display of antagonism and national chauvinism doesn't hinder the Wagah checkpoint from having served conciliatory missions between the states. After the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971, which resulted in the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the Wagah Border Ceremony played a vital role in rebooting diplomatic relations between Pakistan and India. Unlike at Hussainiwala / Ganda Singh Wala in Kasur district, a border crossing some 65 km south of Wagah that remained closed after the war, at Wagah the ritualistic ceremony normalized the status quo and paved the way for an open border and bilateral trade. Wagah captured increased international attention when former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in a diplomatic move to de-escalate tensions with Pakistan, arrived by bus at Wagah in February 1999.

Heightened ambivalence

The Wagah border is a highly ambivalent space. Serving as one of the most poignant crystallization points for articulations of nationhood, it has been seen to bear potential for both igniting and appeasing tensions between India and Pakistan. The checkpoint and the ceremony are steeped in historical, nationalist and religious meaning. Riddled with contradictions and ambivalences, the Wagah border poses questions on a whole range of levels. How can a space that is overshadowed by the most violent events of the historic 1947 Partition of India serve the diplomatic purposes of both countries? How are we to reconcile the fact that the unveiled aggression displayed by soldiers during the military ceremony coincides with a veiled complicity and even comradery among those actors across the border? How is it possible for visitors to engage in passionate chanting of nationalist slogans, only to report afterwards that they are hoping for peaceful relations between the countries, since "the people over there are just like us"? How, in one sentence, can the public fake, or not-so-fake, display of animosity act as catharsis and be used to conjure ideas of competitive friendship over one of the toughest borders of the world?

Its very ambiguity makes the Wagah Border Ceremony an ideal topic to be dealt with in the context of the DFG-funded Research Training Group "Ambivalent Enmity: Dynamics of Antagonism in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East", a collaboration of Heidelberg University and the Heidelberg Center for Jewish Studies. Muhammad Usman's ongoing doctoral research combines historical, ethnographic and religious studies perspectives to investigate the Wagah phenomenon. He is looking, particularly, into the military ceremony itself as a choreography that paradoxically requires friendly agreements about the performance of rivalry; into the meanings imposed on Wagah in terms of place-making; into the broader historical, cultural and religious discourses in which Wagah attains iconic significance; and ultimately also into the dynamics of ambivalent enmity. ●

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Graduiertenkolleg „Ambivalente Feindschaft"

Als Kooperation der Universität Heidelberg und der Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg (HfJS) ist im Herbst 2023 das interdisziplinäre Graduiertenkolleg „Ambivalente Feindschaft" gestartet. Im Mittelpunkt des in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften angesiedelten Kollegs stehen „Dynamiken des Antagonismus in Asien, Europa und dem Nahen Osten". Die zwölf Doktorand:innen und zwei Postdoktoranden untersuchen die transkulturelle, prozessuale und ambivalente Dimension von Feindschaft, um die Konstruktion, Darstellung und Erfahrung dieser Beziehungen sowie die Auswirkungen zu analysieren. Damit soll ein Beitrag zu einem theoriegeleiteten Verständnis der Dynamik von Feindschaftsbeziehungen für Vergangenheit und Gegenwart geleistet werden. Das Kolleg verbindet Geschichts- und Politikwissenschaften mit Psychologie, Kunstgeschichte, Linguistik, Literaturwissenschaft sowie Philosophie und schlägt dabei den Bogen zu Südasien- und Ostasienstudien, Islamwissenschaften, Jüdischen Studien und Israelstudien. Die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft stellt über einen Zeitraum von fünf Jahren Fördermittel in Höhe von rund 6,5 Millionen Euro zur Verfügung. Sprecherin ist Prof. Dr. Tanja Penter vom Historischen Seminar, Co-Sprecher:innen sind Prof. Dr. Joachim Kurtz vom Heidelberger Centrum für Transkulturelle Studien, Prof. Dr. Johannes Becke von der HfJS und Prof. Dr. Svenja Taubner vom Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg.

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