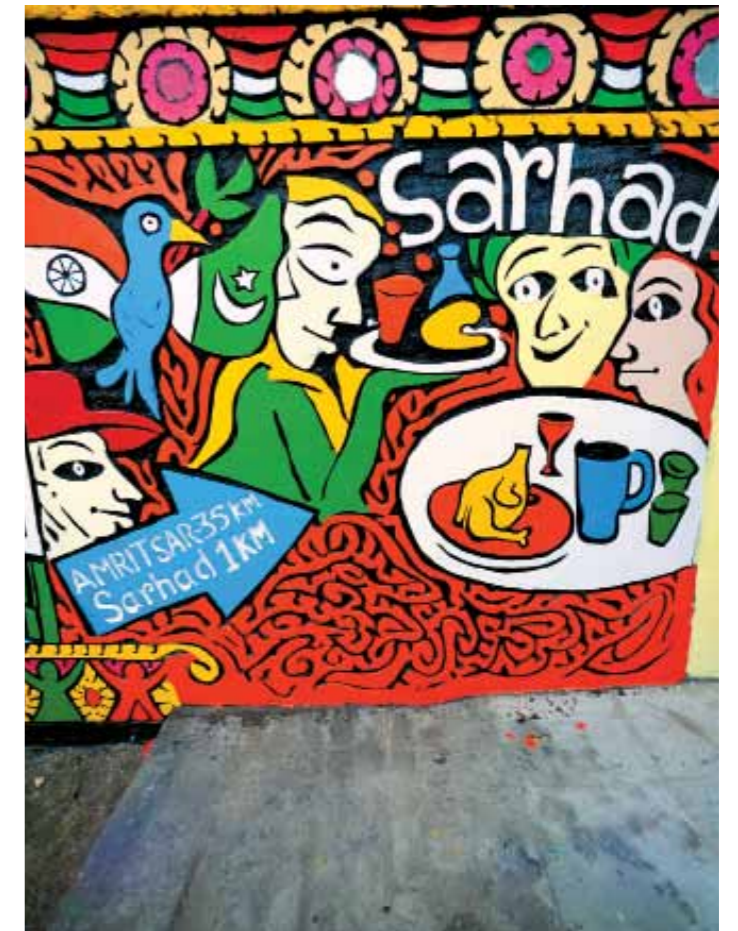




TWO SIDES OF THE COIN

SUPRIYA SEHGAL remembers a poignant tale of cross-border despair and hope—and captures the touristy side of Amritsar

The mock-aggressive Changing of the Guard ceremony at the Wagah border; and (right) rather more peaceable graffiti at Sarhad restaurant



It was the cusp of Independence for the two countries—29th August 1947. The streets of Lahore were burning. Having never felt a shred of intimidation being the only Hindu family in a Muslim colony for over 20 years, my grandfather could now only sit furrow-browed, waiting for the door to be slammed open and calamity to walk in. Paralysed by fear and trepidation, he helplessly awaited death. The door did open, but discreetly, and in walked *khota sikka* (the Hindi phrase used for an unproductive coin), the lazy subordinate that my postmaster grandfather forever dismissed. “You are useless,” he would say, brushing him off, “just like a *khota sikka*.” Armed with *burkhas* and a horse cart, the “*khota sikka*” managed to transport the family safely to his own house. In front of the other Muslims, he feigned anger, resentment and a desire to kill the ‘postmaster’, while my refuged grandfather and his pregnant wife sat silently inside a dark room. An angry mob spent hours in the courtyard of the same house, planning my grandfather’s murder, while my mother whimpered her first muffled coos under a blanket borrowed from the mastermind’s wife. Many days later, *khota sikka* managed to bundle up the family and send them safely across the border to Amritsar.

Stories of such benevolence can be heard from many families who witnessed the unfortunate birth of the forever-fractured relationship between India and Pakistan. For years, it’s been my desire to visit the same courtyard and meet the family of this magnanimous man who risked his life. But the closest I have ever been to Lahore is the city of Amritsar.

Intrigued by the proximity and yet the palpable distance of the two nations, I made a trip to the border city last summer. The essence of the largely Sikh city, home to the shimmering Golden Temple, was more poignant than entertaining to me. Amritsar is full of remnants from the British occupation of the region and the Independence that feeds border tourism. On the other hand, there is the invigorating celebration of Sikhism, with the soothing gurdwaras and monuments, and streets full of excellent Punjabi food. Amritsar swept me into its different hooks, starting with the Wagah border.

It was 5 pm and the road leading up to Wagah for the Beating the Retreat ceremony was a scape of colourful chaos. Hundreds speedily walked to clamber for the best seats, close to the border gate. A garish display of rivalry was already simmering on both sides. On the Indian side, jarring Bollywood songs had nudged many to dance in the middle of the stands. Patriotic songs

wafted from the land across the border too, but were quickly hushed by the brazen loudspeaker on the Indian side. At 6 pm, both audiences were silenced to watch their infantrymen put up a mock brusque act of antagonism. Choreographed zealous marching, and sharp salutes and twirling moustaches, instigated an insane amount of cheer and applause. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, hoping to catch a comforting eye that resonated the thought that this electric affair was plain catastrophic. Thankfully, the energy ebbed away as the flags were lowered and the need to rush out fast took over the scene. More clambering ensued. Nationalistic pride was clearly short-lived.

I pegged my hope of recovering from this misplaced display of nationalism on the more soothing ambience of Sarhad, a kilometre away from the Wagah border. Aman Jaspal, owner of the concept restaurant, ushered us into a contrasting world of accord. My eyes immediately fell on the intricate jali work segregating tables and the hand-painted live counters. Outside, two mini trucks had the signature touch of Pakistani artist Haider Ali, with his simple but busy style. Every aspect of Sarhad was a celebration of the architectural, cultural and culinary heritage of pre-Partition Punjab. Right from the food, furniture and furnishings, Sarhad synthesised the common heritage in the most heartwarming manner. Aman mentioned how he makes several trips across the border to engage artistes, designers and chefs to bring the flavours of Lahore to Amritsar. Even the restaurant's logo has a white pigeon surrounded by the word 'peace' in 25 languages.

Launched on 15th August 2013 to promote the legendary culinary tradition of pre-Independence Punjab, Sarhad's menu is replete with dishes from across the border. The patrons of the restaurant love both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes like *chapli kebab*, *nihari gosht*, *bannu kebab*, fish korma, *miyanji ki dal* and *bakarkhani roti*. I ordered a Lahori thaali to get a taste of multiple vegetables and washed it down with a rich Anarkali kesar lassi, thicker than most lassis I've tasted in Varanasi or Punjab. Of the 50 items on the menu, almost 30 have origins in Lahore and have been brought to the Sarhad kitchen by chefs from across the border. The dry masalas too make their journey with friends, regular importers, and

From top: Ali Haider's truck art on a countertop at the restaurant; and more art by the Pakistani artist on display outside Sarhad



SUPRIYA SEHGAL



SUPRIYA SEHGAL



The façade of Sarhad, a melting pot of Indian and Pakistani cuisines

mostly Aman's own suitcase as he visits Pakistan often to engage and ideate for new infusions. The brick walls and the open enclave of the restaurant sees a heartening footfall of thousands over the weekend, and almost half the number on weekdays. To me these numbers are a delight, as so many minds are influenced by the positivity as compared to Wagah's boorish parade. To end our meal, Aman quoted his favourite line that defines the spirit of the restaurant, "If hunger fuels the fire of anger, food is the energy that propels peace." Before we wrapped up, Aman had one more surprise for us. It didn't take long to decide my favourite on the menu—the Pakistani fruit beer!

The next few days were packed with monument hopping and street food, but I was riveted to the thought of how Amritsar had offered me a bite (literally and otherwise) of nationalistic tourism of contrasting flavours. One at the Wagah border with its rather un-elegant Beating the Retreat ceremony, and the other at a refreshingly inclusive restaurant, Sarhad, which aims at

bringing us closer to Pakistan. Over the decades, civil society has made some headway in clearing the air. It's a pity that comedy sketches where young Pakistanis and Indians talk to each other on the phone, and cross-border arts festivals and a few advertisements, which have struck an emotional chord with the two sides, are only a handful. Where tourism is concerned, little ingenuity, and a common love for food and arts, is what we may need to bridge the deep chasm. And hopefully many *khota sikkas* will emerge as the true currency of change. 🌐

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Amritsar is well-connected to major cities in north India, especially New Delhi, by flights, rail and bus services. The most convenient and economical way of getting into the city is by the New Delhi-Amritsar Shatabdi Express (departs 7.20am-arrives 1.40pm).

WHERE TO STAY

Opt for **Ranjit's Svaasa** (from ₹7,000; welcomeheritagehotels.in), an erstwhile haveli, for a decidedly vintage ambience and excellent hospitality. **Hong Kong Inn** (from ₹1,995; hotelhongkonginn.com) is apt for those looking for a budget stay, with clean and practical facilities.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The **Wagah border** lies 32km from Amritsar. Book a round trip cab/ auto for ₹1,200/500; the border show starts at 6pm and runs for 45 minutes; entry free. **Sarhad** (0183-2382000, +91-9815555931; 11.30am-10pm; meal for two from ₹750; sarhadindia.com) is located 1km away from the

Wagah border on the NH1.

TIP

The summer months in Amritsar can be debilitating. The most suitable months for sightseeing are October and November or March and April, before and after the city dips in winter fog.

■ SUPRIYA SEHGAL