

The Star-Ledger

TRAVEL

Where Pakistan and India meet - Patriotic crowds flock nightly to saber-rattling spectacle

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

690 words

11 July 2004

The Star-Ledger

NSL

FINAL

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English

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WAGAH, on the India-Pakistan Border

Against the backdrop of the setting sun, a crowd of 5,000 gathers along a remote country road to witness an event part circus, part nationalistic ritual - but all spectacle.

Nowhere do flags symbolize the hopes and dreams of nations more than here, at the only border crossing between India and Pakistan, rivals in everything from cricket to nuclear arms.

In a ceremony that takes place every day at sunset, soldiers from each side lower their nations' flags in mirror-image displays of high-step marching and jingoistic posturing that routinely draw thousands of onlookers to **Wagah**, a border post located on both sides of the Pakistan-India line.

The meticulously choreographed tête-à-tête embodies the similarities - and the fundamental difference - between Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.

It also embodies the often-surreal nature of the India-Pakistan dispute, with soldiers - friendly during the daytime - turning out at sunset to rattle their sabers in ostentatious displays of chest-pounding fervor.

On a recent evening, cheers rained down from the packed, stadium-style stands along the road on the Indian side, as celebrants danced to the rousing beats of Punjabi pop music pumping from large loudspeakers. Schoolchildren lined the curbs, sipping Pepsi and munching salty snacks. Turbaned men waved small orange, white and green Indian flags emblazoned with "I love my India," in bold capital letters.

Across the border, a considerably smaller crowd of Pakistanis chanted patriotic slogans and waved versions of their own flag, a white star and crescent moon on a field of green.

Pakistanis and Indians alike take pride in even small differences between the near-identical processions.

"The Indian soldiers looked perfect when they kicked their feet up to head-level as they marched," said Ramesh Kumar, a tourist from central India, adding that in his opinion, the Indians' multicolored uniforms looked better than the black tunics worn by the Pakistanis.

Several minutes before, a half-dozen soldiers from each side marched to the center of the road about 30 yards from the border and stood frozen at attention. Their commanders, facing them, bellowed commands.

A single guard from each country high-stepped to each gate - arms swinging frantically, boots pounding emphatically - as the crowds of their countrymen applauded.

The Indian soldier violently flung open a gate to reach his flag as his counterpart on the Pakistani side shoved open sliding doors on his side. The two men shared a robotic handshake before taking positions under their respective flags, all the while glowering at each other.

The rest of the men followed, one at a time. Each man stopped 10 feet short of his side's gate and struck a defiant pose in the direction of the other country - hands at hips, chest puffed out, chin raised - before taking his position near the mouth of the gate.

Each flag descended slowly, so as not to dip below the other on its way down.

Then, flags safely stowed away, spectators on the both sides rushed into the roadway, cheerfully posing for photographs with the soldiers, some of whom signed autographs.

The Pakistani viewing podium and a small terrace below it can hold about 2,000 people, officials said. On a good day, they added, the Pakistani and Indian crowds are about the same.

In the last five decades, India and Pakistan have fought three wars. Today, the dispute centers on Kashmir, the Himalayan region claimed by both sides, where troops daily exchanged gunfire until a recent cease-fire.

Destination points * Flag-lowering ceremony: The ceremony on the Pakistan-India border at **Wagah** takes place each night at sunset.

* Getting there: **Wagah** is located 17 miles west of Amritsar, in India's Punjab state, a 30-minute flight or six-hour train ride from New Delhi.

1. Indian soldiers, in khaki, and Pakistani, in black, lower their national flags at the India-Pakistan joint border check post, **Wagah**. 2. A Pakistani soldier, left, looks toward an Indian counterpart, foreground.

Document NSL0000020040711e07b00036

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