The Indiapakistani Citizen

An Indian from Kerala becomes Pakistani by happenstance, gets a Pakistani passport in order to get back home to India, is found by the police two decades later, is taken to the Wagah-Attari border to be deported to Pakistan, and is refused exit by Indian immigration because he lacks papers to prove he is Pakistani. He returns to Kerala.

And Kerala is where C Ibrahim is today, waiting for the authorities –including an Indian Home Ministry that is keen to ferret out Pakistanis in hiding and send them packing – to decide what to do with him.

Ibrahim, 55-years old, was suffering from arthritis and infection when the police took him by train all the way to Wagah and brought him back. But his terminally harrassed look in the picture (courtesy The Hindu) exposes not only his physical condition but also his state of mind as a long-time fugitive Indiapakistani.

Back in 1970 or so, then 22, Ibrahim boarded a boat to go to work in the Gulf, but was left stranded in Karachi. He spent nine years in Pakistan working as a labourer, realised it was easier to return home if he got himself a Pakistani passport. He succeeded in getting back to his native Malabar, married, had two daughters, and worked as a fish vendor. Until the police came calling.

Ibrahim told The Hindu, “My family is here… My roots are here in Malabar… I am not an agent of the enemy country. Neither am I a spy from Pakistan… Permit me to stay in my land, or hang me. This is all I have to request (of) the government”.

Every so often comes a newspaper story that shows the folly of the sharp delienation of the frontiers of South Asia. Even though he is from the south of India, which means he is further from Pakistan’s Sindh and Punjab provinces than north Indians, Ibrahim looks and acts ‘Indian’ and he looks and acts ‘Pakistani’. That is because there is very little to separate the two. India and Pakistan are countries whose generals, when they go to war, speak with the same accents to the BBC television interviewer.

What is sought is not one South Asia, which may or may not become a reality. Instead, what we need is a South Asia where there is easy travel between the existing nation states. The fact is that none of these exisitng states would disappear if the borders were open rather than closed. The proof of this lies in Nepal, a member of SAARC which has an open and also unregulated border with the much larger and more powerful India. This fact has hardly done away with the Nepali sense of sovereignty or economic exclusivity. The Nepal-India open border is the ultimate answer for all of the land borders of South Asia, meaning India-Pakistan and India-Bangladesh. Instead, these countries are traveling the other way, desperately trying to freeze their borders and lock each other out with barbed wires and floodlights.

Today, the India-Pakistan interaction is reserved for the powerful, the lucky few who can get visas and a seat on the Lahore-Delhi bus, and a handful of 'Track Two' peace activists that get to travel to and fro with relative ease. Even as we speak, a delegation of Indian parliamentarians and journalists is scouting Islamabad, quick to respond to the faint Indo-Pak thaw to visit the Land of the Pure.

But the people at large are being kept out the picture. They are unable to visit each other, even though it is here that true relationships would develop, links nurtured. The mass of interactions at the people-to-people level would evolve into tourism and pilgrimages, commerce, trade, revival of cultural links. The elite stranglehold on the peace process would be loosened. In such a brave new Subcontinent, C Ibrahim would have no problem.