One has to embrace some level of uncertainty when as a Pakistani you are applying for the Indian visa especially if the application is filed amidst a situation marked with tension at the border. This was the stressful situation facing a group of Pakistanis who wanted to attend the 6th National Bioethics Conference centered on the theme of “Healing and dying with dignity: Ethical issues in palliative care, end-of-life care and euthanasia,” to be held in Pune, India.

We were quite adventurous with our itinerary which included flying from Karachi to Lahore, crossing the Wagah border on foot to arrive in Amritsar, flying to Mumbai and then traveling by road to reach our final destination, Pune. But the process of waiting for the visa, which arrived on the day of our flight, was torturous. However, what we experienced during our stay in India made the agony worth it.

On January 13th, 2017, I walked into the conference centre at Pune with butterflies in my stomach with the rest of the Pakistani delegation. The extraordinarily warm welcome that we received from our hosts relaxed my nerves, allowing me to enjoy the buzz of activity at the conference. The heartening event of this day was the felicitation ceremony for SIUT’s director. As Dr. Adib Rizvi’s benevolence and his incredible contributions to the fight against organ trade in the region were narrated, I was able to truly comprehend what it means to be part of SIUT, an organization that has made its mark in a remarkable way.

As the conference proceeded, the invigorating experience that my colleagues in Pakistan had promised me materialized. The air was charged with electricity, with speakers from different backgrounds, including physicians, lawyers, individuals from advocacy groups and non-governmental organizations and most importantly activists. Activism plays a prominent role in the way bioethics plays out in India, with an emphasis on development of laws in order to bring systemic changes in the structure of the society. Bioethics discourse in India, as it became evident to me during the conference has a more activist leaning than academic as in the case of Pakistan. Furthermore, I was also left with the impression that the Indian bioethics community is quite multidisciplinary, as the event in itself was a

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collaborative effort of different organizations.

On the first day of the conference, I presented a paper in which I relayed the findings of a recent CBEC study on the factors contributing to female graduates in Pakistan failing to practice medicine following graduation from medical colleges. This research was triggered by a recommendation to impose quota system restricting female admissions to fifty percent of the student body. The knowing smiles from the Indian audience made me realize the similarities in the issues both countries grapple with. The discussion following this particular presentation was lively and animated. The Indian audience presented the rights-based argument: the imposition of quota would violate the constitutional rights of female students, making the practice discriminatory. This stood in stark contrast to the opinions of study participants who hardly ever raised this argument. However, there were many similar factors in non-practice including uncertainties of married life for females which the local Indian audience could identify with. Furthermore, during our workshop on “Medical Error and Negligence”, the Indian audience provided examples which were strikingly similar to the ones we hear in Pakistan, again revealing the commonalities between the two countries. The other two papers from the Pakistani delegation were also well-received.

What truly amazed me during those interactions was not just the exchange of knowledge that occurred but also the incredible hospitality that our Indian colleagues showed us, to the point that we were treated like royalty. We were taken around for shopping, sightseeing and to indulge in the mouth-watering Indian cuisine. As we left Pune, we were laden with mithai, other gifts and of course, fond memories. An unexpected flight delay prolonged our stay in India, requiring us to stay the night in Amritsar where the Golden Temple beckoned us. We were also fortunate enough to pay a visit to Jalianwala Bagh the next morning, another beautifully preserved historic site, speaking of the tragedy of colonial rule and of our shared past. The foggy morning was the ideal backdrop to our heavy deshi paratha nashta (oh, how the butter melted in our mouths!).

And as we crossed the border to make our way to Pakistan, exhilarated yet exhausted, we were greeted with an amusing question, “How’s the weather border kay uss par [on that side of the border]?” We replied laughingly, “Not very different. After all, only a thin line separates us.”