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Indian medical skill can't cure Pak's cancer

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In the apocalypse-tinged reportage of the troubled India-Pakistan relationship, came this welcome news: a successful cord blood stem cell transplant on a one-year-old Pakistani baby boy, Shaheer Imran, at Delhi's Sir Ganga Ram Hospital. It was symptomatic of the complex, often contradictory relationship between South Asia's two large neighbours.

The Indian medical team reportedly carried out a rare, unrelated double cord blood stem cell transplant to redress the potentially fatal genetic immune system disorder detected in Shaheer. The operation was conducted on March 15 but the doctors had to wait 10 weeks to confirm that white cells and platelets were being satisfactorily generated. The little boy's parents, Maliha and Imran Gulzar, count themselves lucky. So will little Shaheer when he grows up and learns he was one of the lucky few in Pakistan to have timely access to the marvels of modern medicine.

Surgery for newborns, particularly those with complex cardiac and blood-related congenital conditions, is inadequate in Pakistan. Consequently, many such babies are brought to India by their anxious parents. The distances involved are relatively manageable and the cost of medical care is a fraction of the developed world. Plans are afoot to bring 200 Pakistani children to Kolkata by chartered plane for heart surgery over the next few months. It is a happy indication of shared humanity on either side of the border.

Even so, what is Baby Shaheer likely to associate with India when he starts to go to school? His parents may remember Ganga Ram hospital with affection. Will their son do the same? Many liberal

Pakistanis bemoan the fact that their society is progressively more intolerant, more so after the 1971 war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. The state's Islamic identity and its socio-cultural ethos was distorted and a selective interpretation of Islam was advanced, which began with the persecution of the Ahmadiyahs and later, the Shias. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the deification of the 'mujahedin' warrior – metaphorically portrayed in the Reagan years as the brave tribesman with Koran in one hand and Kalashnikov in the other – religious radicalization and endorsement of 'jihad' had begun in Pakistan.

The deeply religious and extremely conservative Pakistani dictator General Zia-ul Haq used the meta-narrative about Pakistan and Islam as a basic tool block to persuade the impressionable mind that bloodshed was acceptable to protect Islam. History was embroidered, falsified or excluded through the country's educational system. From the toddler learning the alphabet to the college student – the textbook and the curriculum were shaped to nurture this ideology of exclusion and the abiding 'threat' to religion. The more tolerant and inclusive interpretation of Islam gave way to the current Wahabi-Salafi version, with its many inflexible gender-skewed characteristics. Pakistan's privileged citizen today is the Sunni-Wahabi Punjabi-male, preferably with links to the Army, senior clergy or Taliban.

The brainwashing begins early and as a Pakistani columnist recently commented after the New York Times Square incident botched by Faisal Shahzad: "The educational material in most secular and so-called 'English-medium' schools is, at times, equally hateful. Parts of their textbooks tell lies, craft hate, and incite readers for a new world order called pan-Islamism, hence ideologically confusing the students who already suffer from a serious identity crisis."

Is the child Pakistani first, or Muslim? Who is the 'other' and are all non-Muslims enemies? These are crucial questions for young minds, but in Pakistan, as commentator Ali K Chishti avers: "...the entire public and private school curricula are designed to promote, inculcate and incite the spirit of 'jihad' and hatred among children as young as five."

This is why much as one welcomes the spontaneous medical help provided by Indian doctors to Pakistan's Baby Shaheers, people-to-people initiatives need to be complemented by addressing the poisonous ideological indoctrination of the young mind. Pakistan should pay heed to its own commentators, who admit that India and Pakistan cannot live together in peace "until there is a complete overhaul of the educational curriculum in Pakistan and the process of reverse

indoctrination is completed.” Only thus can Pakistan prevent the metaphorical morphing of a Baby Shaheer into a Faisal Shahzad.

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(The author is Director, National Maritime Foundation. This piece first appeared in the *Times of India* on July 4, 2010)