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## Ways of Seeing

Pakistan's paradox of knowledge and denial

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Journalists and local residents gather outside the compound where Osama bin Laden had been living for years in Abbottabad.

**MY TRAVELLING COMPANION HAD**, in his possession, four devices—two cell phones, a bulkier phone that seemingly dialed the moon, and a walkie-talkie. At any given moment, he seemed to be using at least two of the four. He answered one of the mobiles and exchanged a few sentences, grimaced, and punched the end button with some anger. It is futile trying to keep working while surrounded by bureaucracy and incompetence, he said. He used a less-polite word for "incompetence". I smiled in sympathy, though I had scant idea what he was talking about.

On behalf of a mutual acquaintance, he had agreed to show me around a few places in southern Punjab. He was born there in a small town, close to the Sindh and not too distant from the Indian border. He told me that he worked for the intelligence division of the police, in a district near Bahawalpur. His stark white *salwar kameez* certainly put him in the "undercover" category, and his abundant supply of telecommunications equipment suggested he was telling the truth.

We were somewhere south of Bahawalpur, waiting to get onto the highway. I had visited some archives, looking for texts and people to talk to. The afternoon sun was quite powerful, even in early March. The car stood idling, right blinker on, waiting for a break among the trollies and buses racing down the motorway. Just as we were about to merge, two black vehicles emerged from behind a trolley and flashed by in front of us—topping 120 km/hr. The second of the two trucks had an open top—two benches arranged to face the back—and on them sat four figures, clad all in black, heads wrapped, and carrying what looked like some serious weapons. We entered the motorway right behind them, and were soon trailing about 20 metres back.

I was scared. We were close enough to see their T-shirts, which were screenprinted with the *Sipah-e Sahaba* logo. I turned to my

police companion, in the back seat. Aren't they banned? Shouldn't they not be traveling openly on the motorway?

He looked at me and shrugged. Yeah, he said, we heard as soon as they crossed the *tehsil* boundary. We will keep an eye on them, but they are going to Sindh.

I looked back at the HiLux ahead, and urged myself to stay calm.

They have more support there, he said—the drone attacks, the families migrating from Balochistan and Waziristan. It is natural. He explained.

The local Shia population is not alarmed? He looked out the window.

Back in Bahwalpur, I had paused to snap a photo of a poster near the main mosque. It advertised an "All Pakistan Speech Contest", whose theme was "Preparing for Islam and Jihad". The *Jaish-e Muhammad* flag was drawn unfurling over the central green graphic. The guest of honour was Abdul Rauf Asghar ("Mujahid-i Islam"), the younger brother of Masood Azhar, the head of Jaish-e Muhammad. Yeah, these people are everywhere lately. I turned to him and asked whether this was a recent thing. He shrugged. The attacks in India and Kashmir put these groups on every terrorist list, but here they were, being unseen.

As I watched the men in the jeep in front of us, I asked him more questions. Surely, you must be able to tell me why these people are operating openly—travelling, advertising "valuable prizes" to students in secondary division (there was one stipulation that the students "should in appearance conform to Sharia regulations" which would, in theory, reduce the applicant pool)? Is the state—and here I looked at him pointedly—complicit? He didn't say much.

We were on our way further down south to visit a 16th- century fort, which I believed actually dated back to the 13th century. There was no road, but the sun-baked, desert clay was hard as concrete and the car bounced along the surface like to a pebble skimming the water. I was still shaken up by our close encounter with the jihadi kind, but I didn't want to anger my companion. I was also thinking about my 13th- century forts. The drive was lulling. I saw a small cluster of huts off to the side. A billboard advertised water.

There used to be a yearly rally here, he spoke up. Those foreign-educated sons of the Nawab of Bahwalpur organised it. Lots of people from outside would come. Mostly sheikhs. They don't have to travel far, after all. Just airlift their bulky desert vehicles. He went on. The UAE, Saudi or Kuwaiti sheikhs own a lot of land here, and down in Sindh. The army sold it to them. Giant estates. High brick walls, topped with barbed wire, in the middle of the desert. They have their own airport. They fly in and out. No one knows who they are. Sometimes, they will hire people to go hunting in the desert. Mostly, it is their own staff—from Philippines or from Sri Lanka. They never come to town. They have their own world in the desert. He fell silent. Some of the land was gifted to them during Pervez Musharraf's regime. Some, the army claimed and leased it on 99 year long leases.

This was his home. He was born here. He worked here. Yet, here he was, telling me about people who owned property and lived among him—complete strangers who had an existence parallel to his, but universes apart. I asked him: why do they need this land? He shrugged. Some of the land, they have converted to farming. Largely, it is hunting land. Or maybe they are waiting for *Qiyamat* (the apocalypse). I gave a hollow laugh.

In the weeks since 2 May—when the world discovered Abbottabad—a veritable tidal wave of commentary has declared that the presence of Osama bin Laden inside Pakistan presents indisputable evidence of the state's collusion in protecting him. A more charitable minority opinion wondered with incredulity at the incompetence of a state unaware that the world's most wanted man lived in the same town as a military training academy. But what does the state see? And which part of the state? And what do they unsee? We know so little of these questions. Here in Bahwalpur was a small indication of how the local police unsees what it cannot confront. Do the Sipah-e Sahaba and the Jaish-e Muhammad operate with local compliance? Or despite local awareness? Does a man carrying four mobile phones confront a HiLux of Kalashnikovs? What does one say?

The vast majority of the international press—especially in the United States and India—declared that Pakistan was "a terrorist state", as Salman Rushdie put it in the *Daily Beast*. (Bin Laden must have been protected, Rushdie reasoned, because he was "an extremely big man," six inches taller than the average Pakistani male, and thus easy to spot.) The press in Pakistan, for its

part, deployed its own incredible twists of logic and form to explain how bin Laden had lived peacefully in Abbottabad without the cognizance of the local or national authorities.

But such people, of course, *do* live peacefully in Pakistan: nestled within walled compounds, existing mainly through intermediaries such as drivers, gardeners, gatekeepers, an entire substrata of Gulf Arabs lives in Pakistan. Most (but not all) as in southern Punjab and Sindh, are the super-rich variety, with their private jets and estates. This seasonal migration (a mirror image of the labour migration from these regions to the Gulf states) reflects mainly the covert raiding of Pakistani resources and land at the hands of the army (the largest landowning entity) and its close relationship with Gulf. The ubiquity of this practice also reflects how "normal" such houses are—even in the posh areas of Lahore or Karachi: itinerant residents who float behind shaded car-windows as they cruise out of the high gates towards destinations elsewhere. It is quite easy to be a stranger in Abbottabad.

Clearly some parts of the state—the military—have knowledge. It knows that those whom it has termed as "terrorist" roam freely in its lands. They know of organizations, of events, of gatherings, of comings and goings.

The silence of my companion was the silence of the civil bureaucracy in the face of a dominant military regime. The power remains with the military, and the real import of what happened in Abbottabad will only become visible when the military leadership reveals what it knows.