

A restaurant on the India-Pakistan border is building bridges between the nations with food and art

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[Close to the Wagah-Attari border, Sarhad features a menu that combines culinary favourites from both countries.](#)



[Sarhad/Facebook](#)

At first glance, Sarhad appears to be just another restaurant on a highway. But the idea behind it is unique – named for the Urdu word for frontier, Sarhad, which is located close to the Wagah-Attari border between India and Pakistan, aims to be more than just a quick stop for travellers. “It is the last commercial space in India,” said Aman Jaspal, the owner. “You can see both flags from the entrance. It exists at the crossroads of both countries.”

The son of a diplomat, and a graduate in economics, Jaspal used to accompany his father on peace-building initiatives to Pakistan, and came to understand what his father saw all along – that a Punjab united was stronger than a divided one.

“My father DB Jaspal was the principal secretary of transport in Punjab, when the state government pioneered the bus service between Amritsar and Lahore,” he said. “The first time I went to Lahore was in 2004 with my father, and I was floored by the culture, and especially the food. And then I began to think about it – we are considered part of a much larger region, a subcontinent including people from different languages and lineages, but why are we so estranged from people that are less than 100 kilometres away?”

Jaspal, who was born and raised in Amritsar and lives in Chandigarh, decided to bring the flavours of Lahore to India, and he intentionally chose Sarhad’s location for its cultural, geographic and historic significance.

“Before the [parade](#) was this whole thing – military marching and the routine playing out of India and Pakistan’s relationship of hostility and war – [the border] used to be something else,” he said. “People would come here to pay their respects for those that died, they brought flowers and lay them there. It used to commemorate the idea that both places once belonged to the same people that called it home.”



Photo credit: Sarhad/Facebook

Sarhad was opened in 2012 on the Indian side of the border, less than five kilometres from Pakistan. Its menu primarily pays homage to the shared stories of the two countries. While one can order Indian favourites such as daal makhani, chicken tikkas and aloo paranthas, there are also bakarkhani rotis, chapli kebabs and miyanji ki dal, made from Lahori recipes. Apart from introducing diners to the dishes of Lahore, Sarhad also stocks favourite

foods from Pakistan for Indian diners to sample. One of these is the Khalifa khatai, made by Lahore's famous Khalifa Bakers in Akbar Mandi in the Walled City. Similar to the nankhatai, the Khalifa khatai is a biscuit made from butter and sugar and is best eaten with a scoop of ice cream.

"When I told the bakery about [Sarhad], they were only too happy to send boxes over from Lahore," said Jaspal. "It's really delicious, and I hate to see other Indians missing out." Other items include Murree Beer, a non-alcoholic lemon drink from the British's first brewery in Pakistan, and Shaan Masala, the cult-favourite biryani spice.



Photo credit: Sarhad/Facebook

The restaurant's decor is simple with an open counter and about 20 tables spread over two floors. The red-brick building is inspired by those in Lahore's Walled City and the floors, made from marble inlay tiles with set geometrical patterns, are the same as the ones in Amritsar's Golden Temple. The windows feature coloured glass set in arch-patterns – again, inspired by Lahore's havelis. And, on the second floor, the walls are covered with news clippings about Partition. Outside the restaurant, in its compound, trucks painted by celebrated Pakistani artist Haider Ali are exhibited, and a mural made by artists Suresh Nair and Preeti Sood records the historical trajectory of Partition.

Creating a haven

Jaspal and his father designed the menu at Sarhad but those cooking and managing the restaurant are locals from the village of Wagah Attari. To involve the people of the region, the restaurant employs young men and women from the border villages. The heroin industry that flourishes in the area has led to a crisis of addiction amongst the young in the last decade. Unemployment is rife in these parts, but Sarhad, by bringing them into its kitchen, reinstates a lost pride.

"Life here is stagnant," said Ravinder Singh, the manager at Sarhad, who is from Wagah Attari village. "There has been a lot of neglect by the governments on both sides because of its location. It's nice to work somewhere that is the perfect expression of our lives. We see the Pakistanis on the other side of the border fence, and we have always wondered why we were divided for eternity. At Sarhad, in a small way we aren't. It's nice to tell customers that."



Chapli kebabs. Photo credit: Sarhad/Facebook

“We found the restaurant online and were amazed that something like this existed,” said Vatsala Sharma Dalmia, a traveller from Delhi. “The food is delicious, and its location near the border offers a unique experience.”

For Shraddha Rohekar, a resident of Mumbai, the favourite parts of dining at Sarhad were the “newspaper clippings and the architecture of the restaurant”: “It reminded me of how India and Pakistan are similar, despite the Partition, and how much time and resource is wasted in war.”

Shared future

“Amritsar is the central point of the Chinese Silk Road,” said Jaspal. “It is 1,736 kilometres from Mumbai and 1,359 kilometres from Zahedan, Iran – its location is crucial. If this is paid more attention to, both Amritsar and Wagah can profit from trade relations between the two countries and an exchange of culture can take place.”

To this end, Jaspal wants to grow Sarhad, which today gets an average of 150-200 visitors a day, into a centre where artists from both countries can meet to hold initiatives and participate in cultural exchanges. In the coming months, a collaboration with the Pakistan Fashion Council will showcase Pakistani designers’ works in the restaurant. The restaurant will also offer rooms for boarding, and “border tourism” packages will introduce visitors to the history and landscape of the surrounding regions.



Photo credit: Sarhad/Facebook

“Pul Kanjari – a bridge built by Maharaja Ranjit Singh for a woman that he loved, it’s all less than five kilometers from here,” said Jaspal. “And there’s a memorial for the 1971 war. The surrounding villages are old and witness to a unique history – here there are lots of stories to tell.”

As Pakistani author Fatima Bhutto, who visited the restaurant in 2015, [wrote](#), “Lahore isn’t like Amritsar. It is Amritsar. Punjab is Punjab, no matter what side of the border you stand on.”

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