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Silicon ally: Indo-Paki bhai-tech

By Chidanand Rajghatta

WASHINGTON: For someone who once served as a sub-lieutenant on the aircraft carrier INS Vikrant, Raj Singh's Pakistani 'connections' are quite remarkable. Now a celebrated techie-turned-angel investor in Silicon Valley, Singh's career is a paean to sub-continental kinship and an object lesson in how business can foster better relations, a message many feel is hopelessly lost in the present embittered atmosphere in the region.

But then Singh's own secular - if small-town - upbringing belies the narrow religious outlook that is endemic in the sub-continent and forms the ideological foundation of Pakistan. Born in dirt-poor circumstances in Idrispur village outside Meerut, Singh lived in a mohalla divided into Hindu and Muslim enclaves by a wall that was, symbolically, broken. It's a lesson he carried into America, as he worked his way here via engineering school in Rourkee, a power project in Libya, and graduate studies in Minnesota.

Today, while the governments of India and Pakistan gingerly begin to reconnect after years of mutual mistrust and recrimination, Indo-Pak partnership in the high-tech world can be found flourishing in the fecund capitalist environs of America. According to some tech leaders, there are more than a score of Indo-Pak companies worth billions of dollars certainly worth far more than the meagre trade between the two countries outside the subcontinent.

These collaborations take different shapes and forms. There are companies with Pakistani managers and Indian techies,

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firms with Indian CEOs and Pakistani engineers, Indian angels backing Pakistani start-ups, Pakistani VCs bankrolling Indian ideas. "Out here," says Atiq Raza, Singh's confrere and a Pakistani techie-turned-VC, "we don't have the time to think of each others nationalities."

Raza was part of what is arguably the most famous example of Indo-Pak collaboration in the tech world along with Vinod Dham, the celebrated Indian chipmeister who engineered the Pentium microprocessor at Intel Corporation. Teaming up with backing from another Indian, venture capitalist Vinod Khosla, Dham and Raza confected the K6, an AMD chip that would go on to rival the Pentium in the late 1990s.

Raza himself was an 'Indian' discovery of sorts. He was Raj Singh's colleague at Trilogy Systems, an early Silicon Valley start-up, and was enticed into NexGen, a boutique chip firm, at Singh's instance. NexGen was started by another Indian, Thampy Thomas, with backing from Vinod Khosla. Raj Singh, in turn, can be called a Pakistani discovery. He got his break in Trilogy when his Pakistani friend Waqar Shah pulled him out of his first job at National Semiconductors.

Just how little nationalities mattered is evident from the fact that Atiq Raza soon displaced Thampy Thomas as the CEO of NexGen with backing from Vinod Khosla. Together, Raza and Khosla enticed Vinod Dham from Intel to NexGen. While working on a next generation chip, Raza and Dham discovered a charming irony: Vinod Dham's family fled from Rawalpindi. Raza's family came to Pakistan from Lucknow.

Today Singh, Raza, Khosla, and others are hi-tech elders who back each others ideas and wards without regard to nationality or religion. Raj Singh, who founded Internet equipment maker Fiberlane Communications, backed a team of Indian and Pakistani co-workers (Rafat Pirzada, Alnoor Shivji and Sunil Tomar) to co-found Cyras, an optical networking firm that was snapped up Ciena for \$2 billion within months of starting.

Atiq Raza bankrolled Maple Optical Systems founded by a bunch of Indians, including Phanindra Jujjavarappu, Ravi Manghirmalani, and Ashis Khan. Singh and Raza both backed Vroom Technologies, a start-up founded by Pakistan-born Vik Ahmed with operations in the US and Pakistan.

The Silicon world is dotted with so many such Indo-Pak companies that it came as no surprise when the Indian-dominated networking organisation The Indus Entrepreneurs (TIE) readily agreed to start chapters in Lahore

and Karachi this year in the face of disapproval from the governments back home.

"Remember it's The Indus Entrepreneurs. When we are out of the sub-continent, it means more than just India or just Pakistan," says TIE president Kailash Joshi.

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