THE PAKISTAN I EXPERIENCED

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In Summer 1995, I was selected to undergo training at the Flying Instructors' School of Pakistan Air Force Academy, Risalpur, a small and otherwise insignificant town in Pakistan's North-west Frontier Province (NWFP). It was to be my first long overseas stay, but I was not too enthralled. After all, I used to feel that Pakistan was just a neighbouring South Asian country.

South Asian myself, I had seen enough of colourful and sparkling costumes, heard the lilts and laments of a unique oriental music and walked the crowded bazaars that were seen as "experience" the romantic East. But during this five months at Risalpur, I had to entirely revise my opinion. For I had not expected to find so much to think about in the culture and humanity of the people I had come to be with for a short period.

On my first day at flying school I was initiated to the mores of Islamic rites in a formidable manner, I was invited to attend Sadhkar, a religious ceremony. Prayers were recited led by a priest, and the main event got under way. This was a sacrifice to Allah. One of the two attendants accompanying the priest held down a goat, while the other did the slaughtering in accordance with the procedure set out in the tradition. With some difficulty, using the only knife of fitting size available, (which did not appear to be adequately sharp), he cut open the main arteries in the neck of the animal, and assisted by the other attendant, held it down until it bled to death. Death was slow and obviously painful. I was informed that the mutton would be distributed among needy people.

Life in the Flying Instructors' School (FIS)

Precisely at 4.30 every morning, I woke up to a loud call for prayer "Allah-O-akbar,la-ilha-ii-Allah" from a nearby mosque. Around five, breakfast was served in the room, and usually consisted of "Parota", a mixture of wheat flour and ghee, and omelet. By 5.30, the school bus arrived. We followed a heavily loaded routine relieved intermittently by mugs of sweet tea and cigarettes. Lunch break was from 1.00 to 1.30 followed immediately by prayer in a square with a cement floor in the open shaded by trees and kept immaculately clean. This simple structure commanded enormous influence over the people assembled there. Here the man who led, and the man that followed, barefooted and humbled in fearful respect, knelt before the Almighty Allah in total submission.

My life at the School was usually eventful. The long evenings were spent in lively walks accompanied by discussion with fellow Officers. Cool weather and leisurely atmosphere provided a great opportunity for long and lively interchanges. Topics varied from international politics to cricket, and the more exciting the exchanges were, the lengthier would be the walks, of which we never tired. I spent most Friday afternoons playing chess with a PAF air traffic control officer, a Christian. He was in fact the only non-Moslem Officer at the base. One of my companions provided a simple explanation for the poor representation of non-Moslems in government service, "This is the 'Islamic' Republic of Pakistan" he said.

As the late General Zia-ul-Haq had put it Pakistan is an 'Ideological' state. For this union of five geographically, racially and culturally diverse provinces that spoke five different languages, the only binding factor was religion. For the nation to remain united Islam had to reign supreme, and for Islam to reign supreme, other religious had an unavoidable but huge price to pay.

Peshawar

About two months after arriving in Pakistan, I had the opportunity of visiting the city of Peshawar. I travelled by bus from Risalpur to Peshawar, and on the journey had some interesting company. A middle-aged Pathan (tribesman from North West Frontier Province NWFP) carrying a live chicken with its legs tied together sat next to me, and to my horror, placed the bird between us on the floor. The slightest movement of my legs prompted the bird to flap and squawk as if its life depended on it. As a result, I remained a prisoner of the bird for the entire journey that lasted about an hour. This was however the first of many encounters I had with livestock, who shared public transport with me in Pakistan. It is opportune to mention here that street vendors sell drinking water to the thirsty from the most exotic containers I have ever seen. A typical container was the skin of a goat dried and curved, and cut in half lengthwise and stitched around like a sack with the neck serving as the spout.

The bus we travelled by, like most others in this country, was more a work of art than a simple mode of transport. It was covered with figures and symbols painted in the brightest colours possible. Shiny plates of brass and stainless steel, carved to detail had replaced the plain metal plates of the body at manufacture. The original window panes had been replaced by tinted plastic plates. Hanging from every cornice were numerous pieces of black cloth intended to ward off the evil eye. Fence like crash guards made of hard steel tubes protruded several feet forward off the bumper. Identifying the make or the model of the vehicle was no longer possible, and possibly the cost of the overhaul exceeded the purchase price.

In the city, whenever I did not opt to walk, my mode of transport was the horse-drawn cart called "Tanga". It perfectly suited my requirement, slow enough to give a good look around as I travelled, and fast enough to cover the distance in a reasonable period time. My first Tanga ride took me to "Saddar bazaar", renowned for its carpet shops. The shops were well stocked with a variety of Pakistani and Central Asian carpets, all equally vivid and magnificent. The buyer had a great choice, the prices ranged from sterling pounds 25 to sterling pounds 2500. As I found out, the finest carpets were not of Pakistani origin. They came from the great central Asian city of Bokhara in Uzbekistan smuggled across the war-torn Afghanistan into Peshawar. Weaving a carpet as one shop owner explained, was no easy task. Each required around five women working continuously from one to three months, depending on size and quality of the product. The expensive central Asian carpets were made of silk wool and consisted of about 250 knots per square inch, whereas the cheaper Pakistani carpets were made of synthetic materials and had about 50 knots per square inch. However high was the price paid for a Bokhara carpet, it would not compensate the people involved in the manufacturing and delivering processes. Two other commodities sold freely in the bazaars of Peshawar need special mention. They are Firearms and Marijuana.

It is not easy for an outsider to readily understand the political control exercised by the Pakistani government over NWFP. The role performed by the Central Police Force is largely administrative. Law and order is maintained by an umbrella organisation called 'NWFP Levies", funded and managed by the government. This co-ordinates the activities of a large number of armed groups, which in reality are the private armies of Pathan tribal leaders and village headmen.

For thousands of years, these tribesmen have not been completely subdued by any invader or ruler, including the British. They live in small isolated groups, armed and ready to confront any outside influence they may identify as a threat to their lifestyle including the government of Pakistan. Over a considerable period of time, these people, mostly illiterate, have become so proficient in the handling of weapons that they have even begun to custom make automatic firearms. The trade in weaponry is such that shops in small towns in NWFP stock guns of every make and models from any part of the world. Lawlessness and the civil war situation in the neighbouring Afghanistan contributes in no small measure to the proliferation of weaponry in NWFP.

The other consequence of political insecurity in Afghanistan is the wide spread addiction to narcotics. Hashish and marijuana are sold in the open markets of Peshawar. People who so overwhelmingly reject the use of alcohol have readily taken to the use of drugs. Political leaders adhere to the Quoranic prohibition of alcohol but ignore the devastation that other addictions have brought to their people.

A vacation in Swat

In early September, I was lucky to experience Pathan hospitality at its best. A friend from the course invited me to spend a few days with his family in his home in the beautiful valley of Swat, on the southern slope of the meeting place of the Himalayas and the Hindu-Kush ranges. My friend was a rich man, and his home was a large of complex of houses, built round a beautifully kept garden and occupied by a good number of people. At the time when we arrived, in the late afternoon, the elderly men of this extended family were relaxing on string beds arranged in a circle. The servants were lying around on the lawn engaged in sundry occupations as massaging the feet of the masters. I was introduced and immediately the conversation switched over from Postu (the language of the Pathans), to English as a courtesy to me. To my delight, they were perfectly comfortable in the English language.

My hosts were delighted to tell how much they enjoyed Sri Lanka tea and were overjoyed when I offered each a packet of Broken Orange Pekoe from home. I learned from them a great deal about the history of the Swat valley and of the battles that Pathan warriors had fought against the British, including one that had cost the lives of 12000, at the Malakhand pass, which we had crossed on our way.

There was evidence all over this region of the rough time these tribesmen had given the British invaders. Atop almost every mountain peak that surrounded the valley was a picket (a small fort) and at the more strategic mountain passes were stronger built forts that over the decades guarded the route from marauding Pathans. One of these was interestingly named the Churchill picket, where that historic man was said to have served as a young British army officer early in this century.

Our conversation continued through out the supper, which included a wide variety of garden fresh vegetables and fruit, a luxury abundant in the region and a welcome change from the regular Pakistani meals which consist mainly of meat dishes. My friend's house was furnished in a western style. Supper, however, was served, conforming to custom on a white cotton sheet laid on the floor. As I enjoyed the warm hospitality of the men in the family, the women remained cloistered.

The following morning I was served the delicious combination of 'parata' and bees' honey for breakfast. Later my host joined me for a walk through the village. The homesteads, however small, were surrounded by high earth walls. They protected the privacy of the occupants. It was a solid representation of the extreme jealousy with which Pathans guard their women folk. As we walked we passed several trains of mules, carrying on their backs the fertile black soil from the lower levels of the valley to the orchards upland. These small animals were both hardy and surprisingly agile on the slippery and difficult paths that the men accompanying them could hardly keep pace with.

I also saw brick kilns belching thick smoke from the used rubber tires that were used for fuel. Side by side with this kind of concession to modernity, was the traditional occupation of marble quarrying found in abundance in nearby mountain ranges.

Next day we visited Swat the museum of in Mingora. It was a treasure house of Buddhist art belonging to the Gandhara tradition. There were ruins of ancient Buddhist buildings scattered all over this region, and I saw many sculptures of the Buddha on the rock faces by the side of almost every country road we drove along. Curiously, most sculptures had been effaced beyond recognition. I later found out that religious fanatics had enforced the Quorantic prohibition of the worship of statues.

I left Swat after a very pleasant stay of four days. The departure gave me a sense of sadness. Despite the traditional distrust of the foreigner, stemming possibly from repeated foreign interventions, invasions and occupations throughout history, hospitality is still treated by these people as a sacred duty. The Quoranic teachings that so strongly advocate the equality of all people before Allah and the mutual responsibility of human beings to look after each other seem to have had a profound effect on Pathan Society.

The effort to understand the people of Pathan took me some time. At the first encounter they seemed to be unfriendly and uncommunicative mainly because their frankness and honesty concealed their genuine concern. The average Pathan has an easier for me ingrained respect for his fellow human beings. Even the wealthiest and most influential man in the community is humble enough to shake hand, or share a meal with the poorest and the weakest. It was a quality so rare among the people of Sri Lanka. Pathans are often blamed for being impolite, not surprisingly, as politeness is interpreted as a 'treacherous dissembling of true feelings". They may be blunt in speech, but bluntness is merely honesty in speech. I often wondered why their simple and straightforward ways did not make it easy for me to understand them. Perhaps, the sophisticated diplomacy in the social relationships of the society I have lived in, might have had pushed such values beyond the limits of my comprehension.

Farewell

During the last days of my stay at Risalpur, I paid several more visits to Peshawar mainly to collect some souvenirs. However, I became so dazed with the things I saw, heard, smelled and tasted that the tangible souvenirs I collected were small in number. These included a Woolen Chitrali cap (also called 'Pakool"), a colourful Bokhara rug, I cheated myself to believe it as good as a carpet, and a replica of a famous Buddha statue recovered from the city of Mardhan and now being displayed in Lahore museum. My training course ended on October 20th 1995, and just before dawn the following day I left Risalpur, embarking on my two day long journey back home.