

Northern Pakistan: Beauty, Character, Tears*

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I arrived in Lahore a day late—no fault of my own--found that my hotel reservation had been cancelled, and wound up staying in a place where I kept the bathroom light on all night to discourage bugs.

Early the next morning, I went car hunting. Avis says that it rents self-drive cars in Pakistan, but that's purely theoretical. I explained that I intended to go to Peshawar, then north to Swat, over Shangla Pass to the Karakoram Highway, and up to Hunza. I could do it, I was told, but the only car they'd let me have was worthless. I would have taken it anyway, but a call came to the office from Faisalabad, a mere 60 miles away. A car in the fleet had broken down; the driver was asking for help and was told to forget the car and take a bus back to Lahore. Call it a failure of nerve, but I set out a couple of hours later with a driver named Rashid and a very nice black Honda Accord--moonroof, power windows, even seatbelts.

We crossed the Ravi River, which bounds Lahore on the west, stopped briefly at Jahangir's tomb of perpetual tranquility, and headed west. We were on the Rechna Doab, the interfluvium bounded by the Ravi on the east and the Chenab on the west. This is some of the most fertile land in Asia, and it was harvest time. Grain was being cut, but it was neither wheat nor oats nor rye: Instead, it was all three, planted in a blend. Fat-tailed sheep grazed nearby, their tails and ears nearly touching the ground.

We crossed the Upper Chenab Canal, which just before World War I was responsible for the reclamation of this part of India; the cold water, flowing swiftly in its broad channel, was like an immense python: coiled, cold, deadly.

We crossed the Chenab River and entered the Chaj Doab, which extends as far as the Jhelum. The countryside was no longer so productive. The land began rising in soft hills that had been cut to ribbons by erosion, and the fields were bounded not by straight lines but by ragged badland scarps. It was spectacular country for soil conservationists--a classic demonstration of how to lose arable land. Long before Islamabad and its twin city, the older Rawalpindi, the Punjab had given up any pretense of being a granary.

Like other planned capitals, Islamabad is bland and boring and so we went up to Murree, one of the old British hill stations. The trees seemed wonderful, and the old bungalows were grander than anything I had seen anywhere in India's other hill stations, with the exception of the former Viceroy's Lodge in Simla. But then the Punjab and the country to its west were always the most

prestigious parts of the British Indian Empire, mostly because the British admired the physical bravery of these people. This, after all, was Gunga Din country.

On the way west to Peshawar, we stopped at the famous ruins of Taxilla, where a Greek town stood in Alexander's time: The foundations of India's only Greek temple may still be seen here. We stopped also at the deeply entrenched Indus, an unfriendly river especially clear and cold now that its waters are those released upstream at the huge Tarbela Dam. We stopped at a famous obelisk erected, as its plaque says, "by friends, British and Native, to the memory of Brigadier-General John Nicholson, C.B., who, after taking a hero's part in four great wars, fell mortally wounded, in leading to victory the main column of assault at the great siege of Delhi, and died 22nd September 1857, age 34." Nicholson once ranked in the imperial pantheon only slightly below David Livingstone and Charles Gordon, but the joints in the massive stones of the obelisk were beginning to open, and high-tension power lines crossed so close to it that the obelisk looked like a power pole awaiting its crossbars. Nearby, an old stone highway was intact. Built in the 16th century to connect Kabul and Calcutta, it now was used only by tufts of grass growing in its cracks. The countryside was now rising into still more rugged badlands, where houses were cut into the hillsides like caves.

A sign in the Peshawar hotel provided a succinct introduction to the martial spirit of the North West Frontier Province: "HOTEL POLICY. Arms cannot be brought inside the hotel premises. Personal Guards or Gunmen are required to deposit their weapons with the Hotel Security. We seek your cooperation."

Down in the money-changers' bazaar the next morning, there was an unexplained police charge: a crowd suddenly surged my way as a dozen policemen came running by, swinging their long bamboo batons. I stepped into a shop, waited for the police to pass, and continued on to the gathering of merchants who were selling the worn clothes, carpets, and jewelry of Afghan refugees.

Rashid helped me get a pass the next day. We then picked up the required armed guard and headed out to the Khyber Pass. Along the way, we passed homes like fortresses, each with 12-foot walls and gates. The approach to the pass itself was blocked by a gate and a sign: "foreigners not allowed beyond this point unless specially permitted by the Political Agent Khyber Agency."

At the summit town of Landi Kotal, the guard let me briefly out of his sight. I wandered into the money-changers' market, a lane so crowded that taking a picture was almost impossible. One shop owner invited me to sit and take tea, excellent and clear green tea. The instant I sat down on his bench, I was surrounded by a semicircle of between a dozen men, all intensely curious and

unaware of American conceptions of personal space. Shall I blame the heat for the beads of perspiration that covered my forehead?

The shop owner himself was keen for a photograph: with a cunning and camera-conscious smile, he flipped his thumb through a brick of bills. Two men in the semicircle had blue eyes, and they stared at me without expression minute after minute. They weren't hostile, but if things turned hostile I'd be as helpless as a baby. One of the men, who had been sitting with his splendidly intense face eight inches from mine, had been repeating over and over again what I thought was the word "dollars." Then he added the word "Texas." We suddenly had a moment of comic communication.

One man invited me to his village. I was confident he was making a genuine offer and not setting me up for one of the spider-and-fly kidnappings for which the region is famous. We started walking. That was when my guard showed up. I felt his unfriendly grip on my elbow, and I heard the futile protests of my host. Kids crowded round, one making a playful gesture of shooting me with a toy pistol. Rashid was relieved when he got me back to Peshawar.

Early the next morning, we headed northeasterly to Mardan, where we went around in circles until we found the marble-canopied monument that commemorates the British soldiers who died in Kabul in 1879. The plaque says that they had "conferred undying honor not only to the regiment to which they belong but on the whole British army." It wasn't the army that tamed the country around Mardan, however. It was the Benton Canal, completed in 1902. It brings some of the Swat River under the Malakand Pass and out around Mardan, whose outskirts are green with orchards and yellow with wheat from tree to tree.

We climbed a thousand feet or so before I told Rashid to turn around and go back to a dirt road that I could see running alongside the canal in the valley below. He did so, and we came to a canal dropping so quickly that it had been designed with drop structures spaced a hundred yards apart over a distance of several miles. Eventually we came to some bifurcation works: the canal we had been following was one of two.

I told Rashid to wait while I walked up the road paralleling the parent canal. A couple of hundred yards later I came to a gate with signs prohibiting entry. I tried strolling past the two armed guards in the small guardhouse, but they wouldn't permit it. When I continued trying to go in, they got on the phone. A minute later one escorted me inside, where I was handed to a very friendly engineer. He called his superior some miles away, asked for permission to show me around, then did so even though the request was firmly denied. Call it another whiff of Frontier air.

There was a powerhouse here, built in the 1920s to supply electricity to government offices in Peshawar and Rawalpindi. Nowadays, with much bigger stations like the one at Tarbela, this plant was almost insignificant.

A skipcar ran up the hill behind us at a ferociously steep angle alongside the powerhouse's four or five penstocks. The engineer signalled to a man above, who began easing the car down its track. A greasy cable played out on rollers for a hundred yards, then began swinging, wowing up and down. The car moved faster or slower in tandem with the cable's dance. At the bottom, the car almost didn't stop, and the engineer waved energetically at the man above, who seemed about to let the heavy car smash into the powerhouse doors.

The car stopped, we climbed in, and it started back up.

The British must have liked this place. They had elaborately landscaped the grounds alongside the canal at the top; we walked downstream past what had been a large waterfall before the water was diverted into those 4-foot penstocks.

The engineer was proud that the plant was still working well. Still, there wasn't much for him to do. He had a brother finishing a doctorate in Illinois, and he himself was now thinking of advanced studies in Russia. I said that the conditions might not be favorable there just now, but he disagreed: Other people had gone there, he said, and they were making a fortune by taking mountains of luggage filled with goods for sale.

Just then a group of three men and two boys joined us: they were friends of the engineer. One was an English teacher and one was a banker. They had come with food and had arranged for a cook, who was waiting below. I asked if their wives were joining them. The answer was "no," spoken in a tone suggesting that the question was ridiculous.

One of the men asked where I was going, and I said I was going past Saidu Sharif, the capital of Swat, and heading another 20 or 30 miles up the road, at Miandam. It was a good choice, the English teacher said, "a charming place."

We rode down in the skipcar, and I headed back to Rashid. From the Malakand summit there was a view north over rocky slopes to the broad and green swath of cultivated land in the valley of the Swat River. We went down to the valley, where the river was silty, swift, but smooth. It was about a hundred yards wide and seemed shallow, but later we would drive up the valley until winter snows just short of Kalam blocked our route. There we saw the furious tributaries of the Swat, which carried more water than I imagined.

We drove through Saidu Sharif, which was once the capital city of the princely state of Swat, and turned up a branch valley that ran steeply uphill for about

five miles to Miandam, a summer refuge for people seeking relief from the lowland heat.

Miandam was hardly more than a hairpin turn lined with shacks. Still, secrets unfold, and the view from the hotel window was tremendous: an terraced alpine valley with ripening wheat and newly planted potatoes rose up to forested slopes that were gashed with snowy ravines. Throughout the cultivated zone there were scattered houses, interconnected with the crude paths. There were power lines, too, but they too were primitive. After nightfall, only one or two lights would be visible.

I had time for a short walk, accompanied by a growing group of children. Unlike most groups of children, this group was brutally dominated by one boy who, wanting me to photograph him, shouted at the others to move and, when they didn't move fast enough, started hitting and pushing them. We came to his house, which, like all the others, was a windowless block of coursed stone chinked over with mud to cut the wind. The roof was of rolled earth and was dead-flat; a roller stood nearby to keep the earth firmly packed. The roof was supported on heavy beams that supported smaller crossbeams that supported a mat of branches, atop which was a crosslaid mat of reeds and twigs supporting the layer of earth. Whenever I came close to these houses I heard children crying.

Farms here were no longer self-supporting: the population had grown too large; the average landholding was too tiny to support a family. There had to be some other source of income, either from towns or cutting wood higher up in the mountains. Clouds blocked the mountaintops, but there had to be a lot of logging up there, because over and over again I would see piles of squared baulks, two or three or four times the bulk of a railway tie. Sometimes I would see the ravines down which the timbers had been skidded on timbers. In other places, cables had been set up across canyons, so logs that had been skidded down one ravine were carried across a river to the road on the other side. There, the logs were loaded on flatbed trucks by pairs of men.

About half the fields around Miandam were irrigated, but the fields were far too small for machiner: everything from potato planting to wheat harvesting was by hand and occasional bullock. That was no different from much of the Punjab, but there at least the harvested crops were transported by cart. Here everything was carried on people's backs, up and down paths and across the simple suspension bridges that exist here by the hundred and which often have missing or rotten planks.

In the towns along the Swat River, bakers sold hot and fresh naan for a nickel a round. Men with huge woks fried patties of ground meat; the woks were tilted so that the oil accumulated on one side, where the patties could be pushed for cooking, then moved aside to stay warm. But these are expensive foods by

local standards, and the staple is cornbread, made household by household from corn grown during the summer on the same fields that I now saw in wheat.

Someone on my first evening in Miandam mentioned that there were grain mills nearby. It's hard now to believe that I had not noticed any of them on the way up to Miandam, but the next morning I walked downhill from Miandam to the creek that had trenched a course several hundred feet below. At perhaps a dozen places along this stream, people had built small dams from which a headrace canal took off for a distance of a hundred feet: you could step across the ditch--it was that small. Then, when the water was about 10 feet above the parent stream, it flowed into a log that had been hollowed out with an adze and set at a 45-degree angle leading down into a hut hardly different, except for size, from a local house. If you came around the other side of the building, however, you would see a channel through which, if the mill was operating, water raced back into the river. If the mill was not operating, on the other hand, the tailrace would be empty, because all the water in the headrace would be directed into an escape a few yards upstream from the mill.

I stepped inside that first mill. Two men were wrapped in coarse grey and brown blankets. They sat on the floor, next to sacks of corn meal. In front of them, just above the spot where gearing must have been hidden, there was a horizontally set stone wheel about two feet in diameter and ten inches thick. It was pierced by an axial hole about three inches across.

A boy sat on a shelf over the stone and, bit by bit, the corn that he kept heaped up disappeared through a wooden funnel and trickled down into the axial hole; a minute later the corn reemerged as a mist of flour from between the base of the grindstone and the stone table on which it rested. The process generated so much frictional heat that the entire mass of the spinning stone was hot. The men at that first mill laughed when I pulled my hand away in surprise.

They were there to grind some of the previous year's corn. It made sense to do it this way, bag by bag, for corn keeps better as grain than as meal. That's why there were so many mills, for every householder had to carry a sack of grain one way and a sack of flour another way every couple of weeks.

At some of the larger towns in the Swat Valley--I am thinking of Kalagram, upstream ten miles from the Miandam turnoff--there would be a gang of mills clustered around two or three parallel head races: the water in each head race was finally divided into four streams that flowed through hollowed-out logs into a building with four mill wheels. Even more spectacular were the mills lined up along the Shangla River, which Rashid and I saw a few days later, when we climbed out of the Swat system over a pouring-wet divide. We came down into

the Indus drainage at Besham. The Indus itself was grim as ever--its water too deeply trenched to be put to any use along this part of its course--but the tributary Shangla Valley was extensively terraced, and the river itself drove dozens of mills, most of them hurling, every second, a barrel of water from its headrace escape.

A landslide had wiped out one set of those Shangla terraces and had briefly ponded the Shangla River. The river had established a new course for itself at the toe of the slide; it had also created an island between the slack water of its old course and the raging water of its new one. On that island there was a field of wheat that would never be harvested, and on the slope above you could see where one family's terraces now ended in a cliff whose walls would continue to eat into the precious terraces.

Besham is eight hours from Gilgit and another eight from China, assuming you don't get stopped by the frequent landslides. We were held up for a couple of hours while the Pakistani army set about clearing a slide: dislodged, the rocks would crash down a canyon wall and echo for miles; dynamite sent showers of rock flying overhead. Then, as we drove through the same slide section, a large rock, newly freed from its lodgment in the cliff, fell and thudded on the pavement behind us. Our moonroof would have offered no protection.

Rashid looked cautiously at every one of the dozens of unstable sections along the highway, and he crept over the cleared slides at a pace a tortoise could have matched. Near Patan, notorious for slides, there was a small, understated sign: It said Good Luck.

Near Chilas and about halfway to Gilgit the logging stopped; so did the trees and nearly every other sign of greenery. I was surprised, because I expected rising elevation to bring more, not less, precipitation. But the Indus now looked like a river in Death Valley, and the roof of clouds seemed to laugh at anyone expecting rain. It was not until we left the Indus and were following the Gilgit River, a few miles short of Gilgit Town, that we returned to terraced and irrigated orchards.

Gilgit has a major military base, as well as administrative functions for the Gilgit Agency, which in British times was a subdivision of Kashmir. It also has a civilian airport, whose flights to Islamabad had been cancelled by bad weather for five days running. Its one main street had markets targeting locals, not tourists, but it was probably for tourists that the merchants sold bags of dried apricots and bottles of apricot juice. Would locals buy such staples? I thought not.

I picked up a copy of Colonel R.C.F. Schomberg's *Between the Oxus and the Indus*. Schomberg, who came through Gilgit in the 1930s, spoke of a village

called Chaprot as "more beautiful than any other valley in the whole of the Gilgit Agency."

This was high praise, for this is the region that inspired James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*. Hilton's Shangri-La, though supposedly located in Tibet, bears a very close resemblance to Karimabad, another 50 miles up the Hunza River. Like the monastery in Hilton's novel, Karimabad is approached through starkly arid mountains that are crossed by a road cut into a mountain wall. And although the Karakoram Highway today is a good two lanes wide, you can also see traces of the terrifyingly narrow pre-1970s roads on the opposite and near-vertical canyon walls. Also as in the novel, Karimabad is perched on a very steep slope backed by snow-capped mountains, and it looks across a fertile valley to an immense pyramidal mountain--Karakul in the novel, Rakaposhi in fact.

Hilton seems never to have visited Hunza, and he certainly neglects to mention the most spectacular feature of its valley, the magnificent ranks of irrigated terraces, each walled with chunks of stone. When Rashid and I eventually pulled in to Aliabad, the town that sits on the Karakoram Highway a few hundred feet below Karimabad, half the manpower of the valley was gathered to discuss some repair work on one of the irrigation canals that bring glacial water down through the terraces. After a half-hour's conversation sitting outdoors on this cold day, the men shouldered their hoes and walked off into the terraces. The apricots were still blooming, and between the trees were wheat, fodder, and Lombardy poplars, grown for lumber and fuel. Some houses were scattered in the terraced area and were themselves terraced, so that the doorway of one opened on to the flat-earth roof of the one below.

Back in Gilgit, however, it soon became clear that though our Honda could make it to Hunza with no more than a blowout on a canyon ledge, it would never make it to Chaprot. That's why I was bouncing early one morning in a rented jeep. Even more cautiously than Rashid, the driver looked upslope at every slide. The more he worried, the more he slowed down, even in the middle of the slide.

An hour outside Gilgit I looked across at a natural terrace, cliff-walled, level, green with trees and fodder. It lay about a hundred feet above the Gilgit River. We turned off the highway and crossed a one-lane wooden suspension bridge that would have stopped the Honda cold, for on its far side the bridge nosed straight into a cliff, onto whose face we made an amazingly abrupt 90-degree turn.

Within a few hundred yards we were in the village of Chalt, to whom the irrigated terrace belonged, unless it is the other way round. I had no idea how far Chaprot was, and so we just drove through Chalt, whose buildings were all of stone and which seemed to have no commercial enterprises.

We had brought rain with us, and the road was now mud. And so it remained for the perhaps five or six slow miles to Chaprot. These were miles that crossed steep bridges, made hairpin turns, and took us past terraced fields of young wheat and Lombardy poplars. They were miles that also ate thousands of pink apricot blossoms, which the rain had knocked off the trees and which our tires now buried.

We finally came to a village and a collapsed bridge; the driver asked around and told me: "Chaprot." I asked for clarification: yes, this was it.

There weren't a lot of people around, and the residue of the road was steep and slippery. Apart from their doors, which were built of planks so short that one had to stoop to enter, the buildings were built entirely of rock - some cut but mostly just unchinked river boulders: even the roofs were mantled with rock. So, too, were the pathways between buildings: I walked up rock slits, with a gray-white sky overhead and buildings on either side rising one after another like tiers of piled rock, so primitive that I could not distinguish homes from barns except by my Swat test: the sound of crying children.

Perhaps it was just the weather: eventually some children came outside. The boys in drab hooded jackets of Western style, but the girls in bright colors--the only color in Chaprot outside the village fields. Their mothers withdrew, but the boys and girls posed, most of them happily but some of them too cold to smile.

One girl in particular sticks in my mind: she's on the main road and standing with her back close to a stone wall neatly built of alternated slabs and blocks. There's a doorway a foot past her: it's open, and its wooden framework is visible, along with a tree in the courtyard. She herself has that characteristic Pakistani dress: a colorful knee-length shirt hanging over matching trousers, but she is wrapped in a magenta pink shawl that frames the Tibetan features of her face and hangs nearly to mid-thigh. It makes a fine photo, but, Shangri-La aside, the pleasure is all on the viewer's side of the lens.

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