Chapter IV

Pakistan with the UN:
Challenge, self-analysis and survival\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} Map courtesy of National Geographic magazine.
The Indian sub-continent is not sanitised Europe and to come expecting it to be that way is to be sadly disappointed. This in summer is amongst the hottest places in the world. When is a country both familiar as well as different? How can one explain the vast wastes and towering mountains or the natural hazards of avalanches and the cataclysmic advent of the Monsoons? In the towns there is the contrast between the lives of the rich and powerful and the poor, which are so different from the West. Overall, there is so much to stagger and overwhelm the senses. There is so much that is different: exciting, maybe horrifying at times; sometimes inexplicable to the Westerner.

An immense Moghul Fort on the way south to Lahore.

In writing up these times I am attempting to commit to the page the mystery, the excitement and the differences I found being stationed on this part of the Indian sub-continent. I have quoted from letters and emails written at the time to capture some of my first hand impressions. I try to relive the sense of adventure and enquiry which I have always associated with my time there. It was often a solitary existence; nowhere more so than when travelling to the various construction sites. But it has been one of the great experiences of my life and I am again reliving it as I write these pages 13.

Prior to arriving in Pakistan I had already had exposure to the region. While still in my early thirties I had as noted earlier marketed Irish construction expertise from a base in Düsseldorf and as a consequence was involved in a harbour project in Bandar Abbas, in Southern Iran. On one occasion, when visiting the massive old citadel of Bam, we had driven in convoy up close to the Afghan border. I had worked earlier in two other Muslim countries Jordan and Egypt, which I thought would be a good preparation for arrival in Pakistan. In hindsight, nothing had prepared me. I was fated to undergo a whole gamut of exposure to new roles and challenges over the

13 These chapters were originally written shortly after I returned home from my UN/World Bank missions in Pakistan in 1996. There has been some updating and rewriting of them in preparing my current memoirs in April/May 2008.
subsequent years, which expanded my experience and, I confess, led me to learn a
great deal about myself – both the bad and the good.

In writing these impressions of my time in Pakistan I have from the start to take
responsibility for them. I submit that they are subjective sometimes rambling and
based on only a relatively short time of a couple of years spent there. There is bias:
someone might even say downright prejudice. I cannot speak with the authority of a
social scientist or even as a native Urdu speaker or speaker of the many local
languages. I apologise to the reader for these shortcomings as well as for the many
mistakes due to my personal ignorance. There is a further point to be made. I am
convinced no visiting expatriate will ever plumb the depths of the Pakistani soul. Just
when you consider you have at last made a discovery – you come across an antithesis
to your thesis – which puts you back again to the drawing board.

A hikers’ cottage used by the Asian Study Group in the Shogran Valley
on the lower but still steep slopes of Nanga Parbat mountain.

Like everyone else your average Pakistani is an individual, living amongst other
individuals. Thus, it is clear that there, as anywhere else, men and women will be
attracted to each other and whether arranged marriage or not that this will continue.
Pakistani women are said to spend more money on cosmetics than women anywhere
else in the world. Like anywhere else “if they have it – they will flaunt it” – maybe
not in the western way – but in some other way. Muslim men are not to drink alcohol.
However, the country runs a huge black market in hard liquor. Nor does humble red
label whiskey suffice. It will satisfy the expatriate but will certainly be resented if
ultimately and reluctantly tolerated by a local. She/he will undoubtedly expect at least
black label or straight malt!

There is a touch of the Wild West about life in Pakistan. It can be wild and savage
and little value is often to be found for human life – at least for the poor. During my
first month in Pakistan in 1992 I saw the Indus in flood and witnessed the damage and
displacement it visited on hundreds of thousands of the population when the decision
was taken to open the barrages in the lower Punjab and Sukkur in Sindh rather than have them washed away. It was traumatic to see thousands of families wearing what they had on their backs and resolutely moving away from the inundated areas. I will always remember the looks of despair and resignation on their faces. In a country without social support all they had was the generosity of their extended families and, please God, that it was enough.14

The city centre of Mohenjodaro: Indus Culture at least five thousand years old.

Witnessing this inundation and the hardship and suffering it caused I noted for the first time the dogged resignation of the peasant farmer contrasted with the rich feudal types who insisted on being given right-of-way on congested roadways which were slightly elevated above water level. Their impatience and insistence contrasted with the despair and hunger of the peasantry who appeared to have lost so much and who humbly and patiently moved out of the way of the flashy four wheel drives to let them pass. Personally, I felt a little ashamed of myself for being with driver and UN four-wheel drive. But I have in my travels noted this phenomenon; the contrast between the arrogance and intolerance of the rich and the patient and long suffering poor.

14 In August 2010 as I write the worst floods in eighty years are devastating Pakistan. Funds are not forthcoming from the international community. Perhaps it is because the donor governments are afraid the funds will find their way to Al-Qaeda and anyhow shouldn’t the Pakistan Government look after its people itself rather than throwing away its resources on nuclear weapons. Sadly it is the poor who must bear the hardship.
I think that any Westerner will find Pakistan a unique country in so many ways. Physically and although cut off from the original India it is enormous. The very scale of everything is so much grander than anything we are used to in Europe; the immense mountains and rivers, monsoons and earthquakes, suspended dust and the tremendous heat of summer. The Indus River, from which the sub-continent was originally named for most of its life flows down through it. Indeed, in many ways the history and identity of the country is bound up with the river. The river nurtures the breadbasket of the Pakistani Punjab, where the Ravi and its fellow tributaries, coming later out of India, join it. The early Indus culture and sites of later important cultures such as Mohenjodaro, which I was able to visit courtesy of my military escort, were established on its banks or the banks of its tributaries.

Endemic political instability is always a feature. National all-out strikes, intimidation, the closure of shops, the periodic long marches by the opposition to oust the sitting government, the dismissal of the government by presidential decree and the imprisoning of the tainted politicians, the corrupting role of the army; all these events formed a backdrop to daily life in Pakistan. Normally, they were contained and kept out of Islamabad by a combination of barbed wire and huge concentrations of armed police. There appeared to be agreement amongst the main political parties that disturbance in the capital was bad for the international image and would discommode the local diplomatic community, who, I suppose would have to report on it to their headquarters – thus upsetting everyone’s leisure! On a few, thankfully a few occasions, violence penetrated into the city and even into the diplomatic area. Some years ago a mob killed several US marines. On another occasion, while I was working not more than half a mile away, a grenade was thrown and the gate of Egyptian Embassy forced by Egyptian right-wing fundamentalists coming from their Afghan jihad. A truck laden with explosives was driven into the embassy and detonated by a suicide bomber. The Egyptian Embassy was adjacent to the bank with which most expatriates banked. I think about fourteen innocent people were killed and maybe up to a hundred, all innocent bystanders or people queuing for visas were seriously injured. A huge amount of damage was done.

The bureaucrats and the military traditionally have run Pakistan between them. They are largely drawn from the Punjabi elite. It dominates all of Pakistan. Situated in the beautiful wide shady malls of the Lahore outskirts are the top civil administration colleges as well as the public schools; both entities modelled on their British counterparts of one hundred and fifty years ago. The Punjabi senior military class breathes distrust and a vitriolic level of hatred of India which is perhaps explicable as they have been very big beneficiaries of the division of the old sub-continent. While it is mirrored to some extent in the NWFP, I have never found this attitude to be as prevalent in Sindh or Baluchistan. Indeed, in Sindh, I found a widespread sense of resentment of the dominant role of the Punjabis in the Federation.

On one occasion the UN was informed by local staff members that a long march led by Benazir Bhutto’s PPP, which was coming to overthrow the government, had called on the marchers to arm themselves. The UN began to implement the first stages of its seven or eight point security plan. I had been inducted as a UN security warden for a quarter of Islamabad and was impressed by how effective and low key the precautions taken were. Incidentally at the same time I discovered an unsuspected high level of
cohabitation between a number of UN personnel and representatives of the diplomatic community!

May I introduce some gun-toting friends who travel with me?

One of my letters home captures something of the uncertainty and anxiety in relation to this political environment: “I have been travelling for the last two or three weeks and saw a lot of the administration's handling of the demonstrations at first hand. Indeed, as a UN car we were often the only people allowed travel for fear the others would participate in the Long March on Islamabad. One way was the closure of all petrol stations. Another was to place detachments of police with roadblocks at every junction. I saw some violence in Lahore. Tomorrow, I drive back north to Islamabad. I hope I arrive before Benazir's political demonstration to topple the Government15. I think it’s planned for Friday.”

“Previously, the most violent demonstrations were by the small Christian population (they were the "untouchables" before being converted under the Raj). They are the lowliest section of the community and the local breed of Islam is not very tolerant. They were protesting against the introduction of a section on religion which is to be included on all identity cards.”

15 Benazir Bhutto was eventually elected Prime Minister of Pakistan. Subsequently, after a dubious period in office associated with large-scale corruption she was forced to resign and she fled the country. Coming from a family on a scale with classic Greek tragedy her father was executed following his deposal by the general he had appointed as army head. Her brother was murdered in an act in which her husband was said to be in collusion. She herself returned to Pakistan and was assassinated while campaigning in the first free elections early in 2008.
“There is a very strong police presence here in Islamabad. That may mean it’s safe - but not necessarily. The police here are business-like; a newspaper noted that many of the demonstrators who were imprisoned yesterday had their watches and valuables removed while in custody. Diplomats tell me they saw a certain amount of orchestration for the benefit of the journalists last week. So many of the demonstrators are now in prison and as a result the agitation has been stifled - at least for the moment. The government here always plays the religious card when its back is close to the wall. I feel there is a ground swell building up against the Government - time will tell.”

On a more amusing note I added: “Last Friday, I walked 16km across the mountains into Islamabad. There were about 150 of us, mostly diplomats. We were all togged out for the mountains and we went in three of the local buses which could not be considered significant for comfort. I suggested we ring up some journalists and tell them we were the Diplomatic Corps about to be evacuated. Some people – not all - were amused.”

Some reminiscences from the Raj

Superficially, most of Pakistan appears to be governed much as the British left it. The civil service is possibly somewhat more venal than the East India Company and its servants and successors – but not so much. In this institution, which is very strongly entrenched, the vernacular used to telling effect is English. Its grades and nomenclature are still familiar to the Irish ear although its District Commissioners are a breed unto themselves. As with most of their colonies, the British used the judiciary and the civil service to dictate to the army for controlling the populace. There were the Civil lines as well as the Military lines and the Compounds and the military Cantonments, all intended for self-protection and control of the lower orders.

A Christian church in the old Hill Station of Nathiagali, close to Murree, Punjab

16 While resident in Pakistan for about four years altogether between the UN, the World Bank and the EC I took several opportunities to cross the border into India. I’m sure the reader will excuse me introducing some pictures I took when journeying across the border into this section.
The sad truth was that following independence the Pakistani elite continued with this practice to the detriment of representative community politics. Maybe it was too much to expect that change would be immediate. During its democratic interludes the elected politicians have always been reluctant to share their lifestyles and positions of patronage - and influence with the donor organisations - with the mere community representatives. Ironically, it is only under periods of military rule that some advances have been made in developing the role of the communities.

Earlier, I’ve written somewhere of the Hill Stations in Malaysia. Here in Pakistan they were a regular feature during summer when all elements of the civilian and garrison administration decamped and in a ponderous fashion drawn by slow moving oxen made their way up into the cooler hills. Everything must have been put on hold as these slow migrations took place. Nathiagali was one such built in the foothills and not far from Lahore. The contrast between it in high summer and dusty stifling Lahore was enormous. Many of the administrative buildings, churches and residences still stand as testament to the Raj.

During the hot summer months the Asian Study Group outings would take place ever higher and away from the hot dusty city of Islamabad. There were sometimes hikes across the mountains with mules carrying our baggage. During high summer we would aim to begin our hikes at about 10,000 feet. In the background looking east towards Kashmir we could see the high snow-capped mountains. On one occasion we all stayed in a very pleasant log-cabined rest house. It got chilly in the evening so a request was made to start a fire. We learned to our alarm and amazement that the chimney was only there for appearances. A wooden beam took light and the beautiful chimney collapsed although without much damage to the remainder of the buildings.
Apart from the direct inheritance by both the civil and military administrations of the language, procedures and terminology of the Raj\textsuperscript{17}, throughout my journeys I came upon other sadder and more tragic individual reminders. Often, during the weekends I would make a visit to the garrison chapels of Rawalpindi and potter about the old Christian cemeteries whether in Peshawar or Rawalpindi, which is only a couple of kilometres away from Islamabad or on route in places such as Multan, Mardan or the huge military emplacement at Nowshera to the east of Peshawar. Apparently, as the various British regiments moved through their postings they erected columns wherein they inscribed the names of the personnel who had succumbed: either through wounds or through fever. The percentage taken by fever was much, much greater than those lost to wounds. The most poignant memories however are the gravestones recording the loss of wives and children. It appears that many of the British women found it difficult to survive the military life and the hard climate and died young – either in childbirth or from fever. There was one such inscription in the ‘pindi cemetery carved by a distraught soldier for his wife and his five young children who had all died while there on station. You will come across harrowing descriptions of similar sad deaths in the books by Rudyard Kipling, who had worked early in his career as a cub reporter in Lahore\textsuperscript{18} and who wrote extensively of this area and especially of the Great Game involvement of the great powers.

The widespread use of English throughout the higher echelons of the government, civil service and army was unexpected. So much of the language comes unchanged from the time of the Raj. The subtleties are interesting. Being used by senior officials its politeness is immediately obvious – there is no need of threats from that quarter. Inference is quite sufficient. As a guest of the Government of Pakistan although we were UN we had to be sensitive always to the fact that it was their country not ours. This was only right. In addition, to lose face oneself or to cause another to lose face is inexcusable. This I suppose is a feature of most countries whether east or west!

There was one occasion on the telephone with a senior official in NWFP, who was complaining about some issue, I suggested a meeting the following week. He agreed in a sullen tone of voice and I asked him if he would confirm the date subsequently. When he did not, I felt taken aback and went to another meeting instead. Then all Hell broke loose from the NWFP and I had to hurriedly reorganise myself. When the word “suggest” is used the meaning implied is a lot stronger in that part of the world! Thus, little by little I gained knowledge of the subtle differences. Perhaps the more insights I gained the more I realised just how limited indeed was what I knew of the soul of Pakistan. I found myself explaining to people my paradox in so far as I felt I knew less about the country on leaving it, than I did when I first arrived!

\textsuperscript{17} I do not have as many insights into the governance of India but from several meetings with members of the bureaucracy and based on a long discussion I had once with a retired general in Shimla I conclude there are close similarities.

\textsuperscript{18} In Kipling’s day Shimla the Summer Capital of the Viceroy was only a day’s journey from Lahore.
The Dublin Fusiliers are reputed to have been in Peshawar. No doubt, they would have patronised the Pearl Continental, had it been there or some similar watering holes. I think however, they had to put up with the mess in the barracks or Green’s or White’s Hotel. The history records that while they were there they executed some hundred or so locals in cold blood, at the start of the Great Rebellion. They are further recorded to have paid the local Pathan a bounty for the heads of any mutineers they caught escaping. Odd to think of the Dubs out here until you visit some of the local military cemeteries from the time. Morality aside, the measures appear to have stopped the agitation in its tracks – at least in the NWFP.

Social life must have been difficult and lonely. If you were stationed there and were lucky to survive malaria et al., you were really stuck with your regimental colleagues. It doesn’t do now to wander off on your own and it must have been even more problematic then.

A further Northern Irish presence here were the two Nicholson brothers who came out early and were two of a precocious band of young gentlemen: cloak and dagger merchants gathered together by the then Chief Secretary. They spoke the local languages and set up their own militias which they used to “pacify” the countryside during the Great Rebellion. One of them died leading a charge to relieve the siege of Delhi and is commemorated with a colonnade somewhat reminiscent of Nelson’s Pillar, which dominates the Conqueror’s Gap through the Margalla Hills, just north of Islamabad on the Great Trunk Road going to Peshawar and on to Kabul.

One instant I witnessed brought together the heady mixture of this inheritance as well as some tragedy, and some arrogance. In fact quite typical of the Raj attitudes! I

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19 Great Rebellion or Great Mutiny to your taste and depending on where your sympathies lie. Mine lie with the former description.
remember it so well. In this part of the world water is at a premium. Wherever in the countryside water is to be found it is protected by armed guards. In this hot dry dusty climate ownership of water means wealth.

Relic of the Raj in its lonely grandeur harkening back to another time. A disused garrison Church situated near Jhelum on road between Islamabad and Lahore.

I had arranged to meet the District Commissioner in a small town called Hangu, in NWFP, to discuss the question of water supply for a new training centre which had been constructed at some distance from the town. I expected to meet a dignified elderly man, a law-giver and very much a politician. I was wrong on all three counts and when I was ushered into his presence in a wood panelled court room, I was confronted by a man, no more than in his mid-thirties, dressed in a very vivid blue pinstripe suit with a red bandana oozing out of his top pocket and slightly in conflict with his blue university tie. In contrast and dressed in a dusty safari suit and sweating profusely I felt at some disadvantage.

He reached his hand to me and introduced himself as a graduate of the London School of Economics. He talked longingly of London and the places he knew. He knew London far better than I ever did and seemed to be disappointed that was the case. I imagine I appeared to be something of a provincial to his eyes. Eventually over tea, we began politely to discuss arrangements for the water. Suddenly, there was a commotion outside and I saw police with lathis\(^{20}\) beating some dozen or so men who were shackled together by the arms and feet. I was shocked and horrified at what I was witnessing. The District Commissioner laughed and explained the men were being tried for sheep stealing and added “where they are going they won’t need much water.” I confess I left as quickly as I could. Somehow, my sympathies were with the poor wretches. I didn’t want to enquire as to his judgement on their future. I feared the worst.

\(^{20}\) Long sticks carried by the police.
An aspect of daily life: my armed escort when I went outside Islamabad into the rural areas of the provinces. “De Lads” as I used to call them. This is a tradition which derives directly from the Raj.

The Pathan, a people who live astride the border (the Durand Line) between Pakistan and Afghanistan were much feared and respected by the British when they came to the area. Perhaps one incident may be instructive. During the eighteen sixties the British, growing vexed over the carry-ons in Kabul, dispatched an expeditionary army of ten thousand troops there to express their frustration. Only one soldier, an army doctor, survived to return. Probably the worst defeat in arms ever suffered by the British. Eventually, the British attempted to control the area with watchtowers using mirrors to pass on messages and warnings of attacks – quite a sophisticated system for its time. Up in Swat above the Malachand Pass, the young Winston Churchill received a blooding. There on the stones lining the Pass are carved the insignia of the Dorsetshire Regiment, a testament to a turbulent era.

The British tried to overcome them but after a number of calamitous setbacks were prepared to pay them allowances and to buy access to various areas and in particular to have them defend the Khyber against any possible Russian invasion. These tactics developed from the time of the Great Game. The British were often quite cynical and to ensure compliance would make contributions to perhaps three of the larger tribes. This inevitably meant feuding would erupt between the three but the British engineered it in such a way that the confrontation area of such a Hell’s kitchen took place off-stage and away from their frontlines at the Khyber. After the First World War, the British introduced aerial bombardment and machine-gunning against the tribes and that was considered to be very unchivalrous. The Pathan made short work of the pilots when they shot them down. As a result the British introduced the payment of blood money to recover the pilots. Business always took precedence over the rules of war.

21 In Shimla I stayed in the former headquarters of the East India Company from where war was declared on Afghanistan.
Some observers\textsuperscript{22} including many British officers of the time lauded the military courage and discipline of the Pathan. I took a contradictory view. On a couple of occasions I found it quite nauseous to have to listen to Pathan officials in the NWFP boasting of recent events and of their martial code. Let a couple of examples suffice. On one occasion there was a young mullah who took a fancy to a young Pathan girl, who sadly was mentally retarded. He brought her to his village. Her family, not because of the loss of her but because it had under their code brought shame on them, took very direct action. They raided the mullah’s village and placed motor tyres filled with petrol around his neck and set him alight. They shot the girl even against the women’s wishes because while they agreed she had been innocent, they saw that she had been the cause of shame to them. This was the Pathan code.

Another case, which was carried in the newspapers, was the killing of a young boy and girl by their respective brothers after the couple were seen to have touched hands. The Pathan code demands that close relatives carry out these ritual killings in order to avoid feuding, which can last for generations!

A last case of Shura justice I read reported in the Pakistan papers was when the Pathan shura judging a case of murder allowed the victim’s mother to take revenge by cutting the throat of her son’s murderer. On a Friday apparently publicly and after prayers, the murderer was drugged and placed in her arms. Singing softly she rent his throat with a knife. The Pathans have a saying that revenge is best taken cold!

Few countries are subject to two legal systems operating side by side. In this NWFP, between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the writ of the Pakistani Government runs along the roads and main towns. However, off the road you are in the Tribal Areas where tribal law applies and where legal decisions are reached by a group of tribal elders. This is a buffer area where vendettas rage and blood money is paid. Kidnapping of Westerners, as in a number of areas in Sindh and Baluchistan, is a long established and profitable cottage industry.

During my time another tradition from the Raj, the business of smuggling goods back into Pakistan from Afghanistan and after they had passed duty free through Pakistan in the first place, was immense. Not only smuggled goods but also heroin and other drugs were available openly in stalls between Peshawar and the Khyber. The sign of this business was the weighing scales displayed openly.

One further macabre hand-down from the Raj was brought to my notice as I went, as part of an EU/World Bank delegation on a visit with a police escort to one of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) between the Frontier Province and Afghanistan. The escorts, as may be noticed from the picture in an earlier section, were nervous and very much in evidence. I noticed some small children with us sitting up in one of the police trucks and looking as if they were enjoying themselves with the policemen. They were – but they were there as the sons of the local tribal leader – as hostages. Such are the ways of man!

\textit{The expatriate existence}

\textsuperscript{22} James W. Spain who wrote the Way of the Pathans in the early nineteen sixties is a good read.
Then, with its extremes of heat and cold, especially the former, the Westerner is immediately aware that this is a place that it would be difficult to settle in. We expatriates often come bringing with us unrealistic expectations. In the first place, we assume we can build up contacts and friendships with the local population and share and experience something of their lives and attitudes. This is difficult and there are almost insuperable barriers. Therefore, for most Westerners there is the feeling of being in a society but excluded from it. We don’t understand how the society operates. The local newspapers speak out fearlessly. The reports they carry of court judgements – especially in relation to marriage or to wife burnings – are often horrific. On the street, we are looked after and stared at regularly – sometimes unpleasantly. We are aware of a degree of resentment.

Again, on a daily basis the expatriate finds himself or herself caught between the extremes of a liberal acceptance as a visitor of a part of the local culture and social tradition: “after all it is their country.” However, there can be extreme instances of even outright rejection of certain apparent practices. Over time, tensions personal to the expatriate begin to build up. One instance: for the Westerner he or she is brought up to see religion as a personal issue of choice. In Pakistan, there appears to be a considerable degree of manipulation and control on Muslims exercised through peer pressure and the requirement for the men to pray together in the mosque.

The police cannot be considered a civilising force. They display a brutal side, which offends our western sensitivities. Other factors are the level of corruption that is tolerated in public life, the obvious display of wealth and privilege, the apparent seclusion of women and the level of indifference by the political classes to the hard lives and suffering of the poor un-educated masses.

Compared with the life of the local people we expatriates working with the UN or other international agencies have high profile, access to the top politicians and to the embassies of the many donor countries and enjoy luxurious and protected lifestyles. To many Pakistanis the Westerner is viewed as a privileged caste to be served – but not often to be liked or admired. Initially, we take exception to the casual attitude
towards the hardships endured by the poor and the lauded wealth on display by the privileged elite, best summed up as the “Pajero Culture”. Later as we adjust to the country we begin to ignore it and in a subliminal way begin to accept its existence as part of the natural way of life.

Finally, we are thrown back on ourselves, the expatriates, for the most part for companionship and we put up with each other as best we can – all the while assuring ourselves that if we were to meet most again in the West – we might be somewhat more discerning! Ironically too, as expatriates we discover the barriers which divide us. We had a caste system of sorts. Americans will frequent the most secure and opulent facilities provided for them as the primus inter pares of the expatriates and normally won’t mix with the rest. The British are next in the pecking order as representatives of the former colonial power. And so it goes on to the Aussies on the other extreme: both a little naïve but open and affable and organising Friday nights devoted to beer and sport discussions in a yard behind their High Commission. In between, the smaller European embassies and other lesser entities will try to find ways of availing of these small mercies through honorary memberships or incessant rounds of parties, where there are always the same people present. Married couples socialise with their peers. Singles do the best they can.

**Working for the United Nations**

The UN system is the international civil service. The UN considers Pakistan a hardship station. Wives are not encouraged but on the other hand are certainly not discouraged from joining their husbands. It is a very big community and has been granted permission by the government to use its own car registration plates\(^\text{23}\). The UN has its own arrangements with the government for importation of vehicles, foodstuffs and liquor. The latter comes through the Post Store, situated in the UNMOGIP\(^\text{24}\) barracks outside ‘Pindi and was closely guarded at all times by a brace of Pakistani armed sentries.

In all, there were a couple of hundred expatriates based in Islamabad. There were about a half dozen Irish in the whole of Pakistan: a couple of them the wives of UN personnel of other nationalities. Every one of the expatriates in Islamabad is either a diplomat or a UN official and to reside here has to be issued a long-term visa after investigation by the immigration authorities. Tourism is not big in Pakistan. There were a number of military missions operating out of here to Afghanistan. Some were military advisers recently pulled out of Afghanistan and shortly due to return there. Others were into de-mining, which is both necessary as well as dangerous. I admire those soldiers, there were about ten of them; each from a separate national contingent. There is real personal risk in their work; whether from random shooting, rocket attacks or the mines they handle on a daily basis.

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\(^{23}\) In recent years this has changed.

\(^{24}\) UNMOGIP – United Nations Military Observer Group India and Pakistan. This outfit was staffed by serving military from a variety of eastern and western armies, navies and air forces. They alternated between locations in Pakistan and Srinigar, just across the border in Kashmir. Earlier before the current round of hostilities it was considered to be an idyllic posting – not now.
The UN established a social club, the UN Club, in an isolated but salubrious leafy quarter of Islamabad, in the shadow of the Margalla Hills. It was located in a converted residential building and consisted of a restaurant, a small bar and gardens with a small swimming pool. By government decree it was only tolerated. Local Pakistani friends were explicitly excluded from entry on pain of the Club losing its license. The liquor was supplied from the individual UN allowances, which were more than ample. It was a pleasant watering place and a melting pot for the many and various nationalities, which form the UN family. It was one of the two social centres, which were untied.

The other, the American Club, was much more upmarket but much, much, more security conscious and difficult to gain entry to. They changed the security passes issued every month or so and there was considerable time and trouble involved in keeping up to date. Other Clubs were operated by the larger embassies. I was once in the British Club, never in the French. A main social occasion was the arrival on a Tuesday, of the British Airways pilots and especially the air hostesses prior to their departure on Saturday or Sunday. Great efforts were made to woo them to the various Clubs so as to bring a bit of colour into the pre-dominantly male-only expatriate social life. There were occasionally high jinks and dancing on tables. On one occasion, a very sophisticated Iranian lady and her beautiful chestnut haired daughters were the toast of the week. They entrapped so many of the all too available and susceptible male audience.

The first manager of the Club was a former Yorkshire policeman. He was always about the place hiring and admonishing staff; setting up systems to improve the atmosphere and organising the weekend social occasions. We were very impressed. Even more outstanding was his decision to give up home leave and to use the time for even more improvements. Later, we were all very happy to subscribe to his departure present and party but were a little taken aback by the often graphic fulsomeness of the
tributes paid to him by his staff, all young men! He had obviously been living in a particular kind of paradise. On his departure the chairperson appointed was a no-nonsense Australian wife of a de-mining colonel. She sure cleaned out the Augean stables – but the consensus was there was something missing ever after!

I suppose with the availability of a pleasant relaxed area to sit and chat away with the range of UN nationalities it acted as a magnet. The UN is essentially a family and in Pakistan and Afghanistan its members were engaged in a variety of useful and humanitarian activities. As brothers and sisters you had almost every nationality represented. There was a sophisticated long and languid Ethiopian with a dry sense of humour in charge of the political aspects of UN Afghan policy. There were representatives of the smaller European and African states. Colour was provided by the East Asian nationalities. Australians and New Zealanders were represented in the de-mining process. On occasion, there would be a national night when small groups would help prepare the national dishes and get together to sing and play their national instruments. Strangely enough, I think St. Patrick’s Day was the biggest festival. Of course it was not just the five Irish UN people and a couple of consultants but it also included American-Irish, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders and the regulars, who all wanted a party.

Later, when in 2002 I went back on a Programming Mission I was pleased and relieved on a St Patrick’s Day to be able to march inside with a colleague and wet the shamrock without any fuss. I just walked in and was recognised as a UN person returning to the watering hole. I wasn’t but it was pleasant to relax there again. It wasn’t so pleasant in the international protestant church not far away in the Diplomatic Enclave where an assassin slaughtered several worshippers when he lobbed a hand grenade into a religious service. The poor innocents! He was probably an Al-Qaeda or Taliban and anxious to wreak revenge for what was going on across the border in Afghanistan. It was ever thus for the exposed Christian minorities in Pakistan.

Although India is so near, the Indian diplomats in Islamabad were constantly under close surveillance and were not allowed outside the perimeter of Islamabad. This was probably, no definitely, reciprocated to the fullest by the Indian authorities across in Delhi. For the Indians in Islamabad and the Pakistanis in Delhi both considered themselves to be serving in punishment stations. It was particularly ironic as they both spoke the same languages. There were the petty things. We invited the whole diplomatic representation to the St. Patrick’s party. The Indians had their cars damaged and tyres deflated. This was just to show that their presence at any festivities was resented. I was quite friendly with the Indian Charge d’Affaires. Whenever he visited he was followed closely and two or three police cars drew up alongside and waited for him. It gave us a sign that we were considered to be harbouring the enemy. We were not encouraged to have too close relationships with them. They were regularly ostracised as part of Pakistan’s security policy. Anyway, they always looked ahead to better subsequent postings. My friend was subsequently transferred to be consul in San Francisco. He enjoyed it there.

One Saturday afternoon there was a very poignant occasion at the UN Club. Four UN officials had been travelling unescorted in Afghanistan when they were stopped. The local Afghans then shot three of them out of hand. The reason appeared to be the
attackers’ resentment that their villages were not receiving a sufficient share of aid. The fourth ran to safety through a minefield. The bodies were laid out in the garden of the Club. One was a Dutch Christian I had often walked with through the Margallas. The other was a Burmese Buddhist and the last a British atheist. It was a very simple occasion with short speeches before the bodies were transferred home.

Next of kin were there. They had obviously come a long way to be there for a last occasion with their loved ones they had not seen for months or years. The UN nationalities turned up each decked out in their own national dress to pay their respects. A Christian hymn was played and followed by a Buddhist chant. Last came the British boy’s favourite jazz music. It was very touching and made us very aware of ourselves truly as a family.

**My work as ILO project architect and later**

I think that I mentioned earlier that my periods in Pakistan covered some two and a half years spent working for the ILO from Mid 1992 until the end of 1995 with a one-year gap. This was followed by six months working as a team member for the World Bank finalising reports on two very large education projects; one was for ten thousand schools in the Punjab and the other for four thousand schools. I worked on developing proposals for an education improvement project including revision of examinations. Unfortunately, this latter project never took off.

Finally from mid-1996 until Mid-1998 I took part on some eight six-week long project preparation missions for the EC involvement in the Social Action Programme Project under which the EC, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the British and Dutch Governments helped finance major reforms undertaken by the then Pakistani Governments. Subsequently, with the explosion by the government of nuclear devices in 1998 and the takeover by the current military government, there was a curtailment of some of this aid. I think my last mission to Pakistan was about 2005 or perhaps later.

Thus, the ILO afforded me as a project architect an entry into Pakistan and into education programme reform subsequently. From this I joined the World Bank and subsequently was taken up by the EC, who availed of my humble services later and then afterwards I was joined by a Dutch lady sent out as my working colleague for the SAPP and subsequently for Nepal, Tanzania and Cambodia involved on projects based on budget support. In passing, I think I was very fortunate in having been in the right place at the right time to make this transformation from the building to the education scene. I confess too that I very much more enjoyed the challenge and especially the scale of education activities. This transfer took me out of the single focused project approach to a much more macro-scale programme: one where governments are supported in their everyday planning and capacity building.

While I like to think that the transition was based on recognition of a certain capacity and management ability, I think that it mainly had to do not so much with such aspects but more to do with a fairly simple honesty coupled with some limited but

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25 Things change again. Even as I edit these pages I am preparing to leave as team leader for an EC programming mission to Pakistan, commencing on the 4th March 2002.
necessary capacities. From the outset I felt proud to be a part of the UN. My appointment indicated to me a new level of recognition by an international organisation. It gave me intense private and personal satisfaction. I was issued with my UN passport or laissez-passer with its blue cover and UN insignia and with the ILO logo underneath. I was instructed to present it when involved with officialdom or when travelling anywhere in the Middle East. I feel the fact that I have worked as an official of the United Nations added a cachet I had not had before.

There are plenty of institutional politics amongst the various UN agencies. It is my experience however that the international agencies, at their best, are highly motivated and impressive. While individuals don’t always meet these standards, I found the best of them to be energised, sophisticated, knowledgeable and well-rounded people with genuine flashes of idealism. The UN was the only pluralist organisation in this very Muslim country. There were about two hundred staff involved in some twenty different agencies covering a wide remit and roles from military observers between India and Pakistan and between Pakistan and Afghanistan, to UNCHR which deals with refugees, to ourselves in the ILO, who were charged with manpower development and training issues, employment legislation, elimination of child labour etc., As a senior UN official I had status and was treated with a degree of respect. For missions, I had my official UN car and driver. These were perks to offset the often mentally and physically grinding work.

On a more utilitarian level the laissez passer was my entry ticket to the UNMOGIP Post Store where I picked up my booze rations and special western foods. My booze ration for a month included four bottles of whiskey, four bottles of other spirits about twelve bottles of wine and a box of beer. Irish whiskey was available at US$ 8 per bottle. It was certainly a generous allowance. We were encouraged to donate whatever we couldn’t drink to the UN Club in Islamabad, where I used to eat and socialise a lot with my much loved and much admired black, white, yellow and navy-blue colleagues. The use of the laisser passer on occasion could be stretched to a little illegality; to obtain an Indian visa for travel across as if I was on UN business. But these were only small sins.
Turning to the respective jobs I had perhaps we’ll start with the National Vocational Training Project (NVTP). The National Vocational Training Project represented a significant investment by the major donors, the World Bank, the European Commission, the then British ODA and Canadians and Germans made to develop the training infrastructure of Pakistan. The total value of donor funds for the construction elements was of the order of US$100 million which even in today’s terms is quite substantial. The overall objective of the project was laudable and was to provide infrastructure and management development for the creation of a modern national training system. It was largely based on the experiences of the European Union states. Unfortunately given that there was not a great deal of industrial infrastructure existing in Pakistan and that most realistic training and employment was provided informally in the bazaars, the initiative could be faulted in being supply rather than demand-driven. Progress could be described as somewhat phlegmatic. The general rule was for the interest to focus on the construction of the buildings and the procurement of equipment, as that was where the money was, instead of in training needs assessment or placement of trainees. It was ever so.

26 The man facing the camera is Sajid Nomani a counterpart of mine who is directly descended from the last Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb. For many generations it has been the tradition in his family for first cousins to marry. We worked a lot together and through his good offices I learned to meet many of the “great” and the “good” in Lahore.
My job description indicated all the classical functions of project management and capacity building for some twenty one training centres that were to be built for the National Training Board of Pakistan. The great thing was that while I was to be based in the National Training Board Headquarters, a fairly miserable and poorly maintained building in the Blue Area of Islamabad there was in fact very small constraint on my activities. The construction sites were located in every province and spending a minimum of 50% of my time in the field enabled me to traverse and see so much of both the country and the different peoples that go to make up Pakistan.

Many hands were extremely interested in the construction and procurement programme and as to ways through which it could be milked for personal gain. It was not unknown for tenders to be issued and contractors to be appointed on several occasions. Each new contractor would then be required to make the necessary donation to the Additional Secretary and the Minister and their minions. Given this level of patronage a small contractor would be terrified for his prospects, both material as well as personal, were he not to acquiesce to the needs of his superiors and betters.

In many ways it was seen as a game. The poachers included the contractor, clerks of works, resident engineers (but not always), the paymasters in the Ministry of Labour and their contacts in the Ministry of Finance – and all topped by the Minister and the

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27 As I dip back into these memoirs over the years I am amazed at the momentous developments which have taken place in parts where I have been engaged. One example: on or about the beginning of May 2011 as Daphne and I were attending a wedding in Lago Maggiore in Italy word came through that Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al Quaeda and the man responsible for the September 11th attacks on New York, had been executed by US SEALs in a raid on a private house and compound in Abbottabad about 60km north of Islamabad. Ironically, I knew the place well as earlier I had designed and built a training institute there! Earlier there was the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in 2008.
Additional Secretary. The gamekeepers were the Directors General, who would in the end be held accountable by those same Ministers and Additional Secretaries. They were assisted to ensure transparency from the donors’ point of view by individual technical experts, directly appointed by the donors. Thus, I worked both for the host Ministry through its National Training Board as well as for the ILO, who acted as agents for the World Bank and the other donors. Then again I worked for the relevant provincial governments in the four provinces.

The project management should have been straight forward enough. Initially I visited some ten training centre sites on which work had stopped for a whole variety of reasons – most of which seemed at least at the beginning of my tour of duty to be obscure and difficult to understand – certainly in the narrow contractual context. I then began to realise that I was considered to be something of a busybody and my presence and my urging was deeply deprecated in certain high quarters. There was a great deal of manipulation going on in the background. I think I put it well in a letter home at the time and from which I quote below:

“What am I doing here? I’ll try to sum it up. Essentially, I am second in command co-ordinating a major World Bank, UN, EC, German and Canadian Government funded National Vocational Training Project which is planned to cover all of the identified training needs of Pakistan. The project has another two years to run and is way behind in terms of completion. The physical infrastructure consists of the construction of 21 training institutes. My title is Deputy Chief Technical Adviser and Project Architect. My job in the initial phase is to put the skids under the rate of construction and to resolve a number of major contractual disputes including determining some contracts.

The big challenge here is to be able to ignore the corruption and to try to salvage some good from this enormous project in which the donors are sinking of the order of 100 million US$. The technical problems are insignificant but the outright resistance of
the fat cats at the top of the Ministries and the Ministers towards any constraints on their freedom of action to feed off the loans and grants gets to you after a while. It’s difficult to find counterparts who will open up to you with background and information. The big complaint here is lack of transparency.

Given the political complexion of the contractors and the direct participation of politicians, back-handers etc., it is quite a tall order. You have little authority to counter their more atrocious manoeuvres. As an adviser, you have no executive authority. It’s necessary to cloak your objections using technical phrases and excuses. The moneys involved are substantial. Most of it is being spent on civil works and equipment. Unfortunately, those are my areas.”

In coming to terms with this real agenda I found the support of my fellow UN colleagues to be invaluable. I had strong support always available from key Pakistani officers working in the World Bank, who seemed to appreciate what I was trying to do.

This was in contrast to some of my immediate ILO project colleagues, who I sometimes thought would have preferred if I had let things take their own course rather than upset the Director General and some of the higher civil servants and politicians. At a public meeting in the Ministry I was bawled out by an irritated Additional Secretary for the way I was imposing unfair and harsh contractual conditions on poor un-educated builders. This wasn’t uncommon. My defence was that the Ministry had signed up for these conditions in the past. They were being implemented fairly to one degree or another in most developing countries and why should Pakistan be considered an exception.

That explanation might have been too disingenuous for him and for others in the audience. In a way they saw me as a “firingi”, a foreigner, who lived well and who interfered with their lifestyle and certainly with their values. I was never so far as I can remember personally threatened. I was to some degree protected by my status as a UN official. While the UN went out of its way normally to avoid confrontation and to maintain a harmonious relationship with the government and the civil service, for one of them to be attacked or worse would certainly provoke investigation of the host government and perhaps some embarrassing disclosures.

Several of my local Pakistani colleagues – especially resident engineers who reported to me on defaults by the contractor - ran a much more serious risk. I tried to protect them and to personally threaten to report the contractor if it happened. It happened on one site at Muzzafargarth, in the South Punjab, where the contractor brutally assaulted two of them. I felt shattered as they had done their jobs correctly for me. I was not able to give them protection. I had the contractor censured and fined but I don’t think that upset him too much. It was a very unpleasant experience.

I covered vast treks through the mountains, the plains of the Punjab, the coastlands and the mountains up to Quetta. Usually I would fly to the nearest city and from there would be driven by my UN drivers who had set off a couple of days earlier by car. On other occasions I would hire a taxi or be picked up by one of the provincial government officials and driven to the site. That was invariably the case in Baluchistan as there were always concerns for my safety and the fear that I could be
kidnapped. In Sindh too I nearly always had an armed escort – but I preferred to do without it if at all possible. I was always conscious that if I was driven up a road with full escort any malefactor knew quite well I would be returning by the same road! Never the less, I am very grateful to all those people who went out of their way to ensure I had a safe journey.

I was well treated on these site visits. Always there were food and minerals. Sometimes there were a few flies too to garnish the meal. It was chicken or it was mutton. Always in Sindh, when I visited the various sites and before I arrived there would be welcoming banners and posters for the “World Bank Architect” and maybe with a cute misspelling or two. As guest of honour and before the inspection I would be invited to dine on cushions. No one would eat until I started and as soon as I finished everyone would stop. That is the tradition in welcoming honoured strangers. Initially, before I realised this I often only had a quick snack as I wanted to get on with the business. Afterwards, I learned that such courtesies are expected to be extended both ways and I took more time!

I was often in trouble with the UN over not radioing in to base on a daily basis. This was especially the case with my pal and co-tenant in Islamabad, who was UN Deputy Resident Representative for Pakistan at the same time. On many occasions the radio was not in contact because of the intervening mountains or because the batteries were caput. On other occasions I confess I forgot. Then I usually got bawled out in a good natured way at the bar of the UN Club.

I catch something of the flavour of the driving and of the tragically unexpected in the following extract from another letter home to Daphne:

“T’m travelling a lot. In a way it’s as well that you are home as you wouldn't see a lot of me. The life is physically tough and challenging. (Most wives and family spend months back at home, especially the hot summer months when the temperatures can be in the high forties).
Last Sunday and Monday I was working on escalation claims in Lahore. Tuesday, I left by overland jeep to two sites about 200 miles apart. Sitting in vehicles for 7/8 hours travelling over sometimes difficult terrain is normal.

On Thursday on the way home, we were driving in two cars. I was in the second car when the first car struck a child and severely injured him. Our driver had no chance as the child ran into him. I saw it all clearly. We took him into a hospital where I hope he will recover. He must have internal injuries. I'm very dispirited by the experience.

The child, he was only a toddler, ran across the road and straight under the wheels of the first vehicle. My driver in the second car stopped and grabbed the child and put him in the back with me. Then he grabbed the nearest villager and off we went like the blazes for the nearest hospital outside Peshawar. The child was alive when we went with him and the villager to the doctor. We gave him a lot of water on the way and he was alive. I just hope he survives – but I wonder?

My driver Akram explained that if we have waited at the accident site it was quite possible we would have been attacked and stood a risk of being killed by the irate villagers!"

I confess that generally I liked the people involved both on the UN and the Pakistani side and I made a point of mixing as well and as often as I could with them. I wasn’t always easy to mix with the local Pakistanis except when we went on missions together then I tried hard to build bridges and to socialise. I think this was appreciated. Some of my colleagues were much more reserved and this contributed sometimes to their inability to get things done. I found if you try to be human, to treat people as friends and equals and wear a smile you can achieve a lot!

Sometimes relations could be bizarre. At a meeting in Karachi with the Chief Minister for Sindh, he asked me which country I came from, and, on hearing Ireland he murmured so that everyone present could hear “Ireland can't be as corrupt as here". I suppose, in his opinion anyone, even me, has to be preferable to the local plumbers and what they refer to as “their leaky pipes.” Generally, in Karachi I found my colleagues to be a crowd of happy gangsters although there has been a lot of violence and drug running in recent times.

The most senior Pakistani staff member to which I reported directly was Sher Akbar, a Pathan, and the Director General of the National Training Board. He was a slight angular man and suffered I think from asthma. Although initially distant and often inscrutable to me I found him highly intelligent and pleasant to work with. The longer I grew to know him the more relaxed and pleasant were our exchanges. His brother, a surgeon, had studied for a while in the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin, where Daphne worked. He literally used to paper a part of his office walls with the Gantt management print-outs from my computer. These were records of work done and hopeful forecasts of progress to be achieved. They rarely were – but they looked really well – they gave an otherwise bleak interior a certain bon ton. He remarked they were very much appreciated by his visitors.
Sher Akbar’s job was not an enviable one. On the one hand he had to placate the constant criticism coming from the resident World Bank representatives, local Pakistanis, who were very insightful and thus highly critical of the way the ongoing construction business was being conducted, and the incoming World Bank donor missions, which came twice a year to vet progress and whether the project was “in compliance”.

On the other hand he owed his position to the good favour of the local politicians, especially the Minister and to the Additional Secretary of the Department of Labour, who as I’ve earlier noted was a very dubious piece of goods. Project implementation in the developing world is not quite the same as might be expected in the West. This is especially the case with regard to countries like Pakistan, Nigeria or Papua New Guinea. The trick for the incoming World Bank donor missions was to do a balancing act and to adopt the parson’s egg approach for their reports and especially to highlight the “good-in-spots” parts. Great efforts were made to find and calibrate these latter pieces. Invariably, they would be accompanied by an exhortation for greater diligence and revised targets. Part of my job was to aid and abet the incoming missions in identifying these parts and to provide a technical gloss, if required.

These incoming World Bank donor missions cannot however be disregarded. They, on occasion, had their serious side. Following my departure from a later Social Action Programme Project, the whole Baluchistan component was aborted when it was discovered that one of the principal contractors had been murdered on the specific instructions of the local provincial Minister of Labour.
Thus, senior officials such as Sher Akbar, if they wished to continue in office, had to run a narrow gauntlet. They could try to temper the avarice of the aforementioned Minister and his senior civil service officers. There was always the risk in this if they didn’t satisfy the latter to some extent that the Minster and his colleagues would take their revenge against the project in some high-handed way - or even against the project personnel. The Sher Akbars would then have to weigh this carefully against the risk of provoking the donors to take extreme action such as closing down the project through over-scandalous behaviour in its implementation. One way was to develop an understanding with a Chief Technical Advisor or Project Architect and to reach an understanding or balance to overlook some abuses in order that the whole project could proceed in a reasonable fashion.

Thus you have what might be termed a project overhead. Such arrangements are often the unsung stuff of development and occur everywhere to some degree. I recollect speaking on the subject to a close friend of mine, the then Deputy Resident Representative of UNDP and some other UN colleagues. We speculated that the price of operating in developing countries will vary. In tough cases such as Pakistan it could have been 25% of the gross donors’ contribution and even higher in some instances.

Under the Director General were the construction engineers, who owed their position and their loyalties to the officials who had appointed them. They were very poorly paid and in order to make ends meet for them and their families were often under pressure to compromise. I suppose they didn’t lose too much sleep about this. But personally, they were bright congenial fellows and small fish. There was usually at least one of them designated to accompany me ostensibly for my safety and of course to report back on whatever decisions I made. As a rule, they always sided with the contractors and their allies. I tried to devise all manner of stratagems to keep them away from me. On the other hand, I came across many of the provincial engineers who despised this kind of approach and who did all they could to get the job done in a satisfactory fashion. The contractors were very much a mixed bunch between victims
and fellow travellers. I didn’t trust them much. Ironically, one of the greatest gangsters I encountered amongst them was an alcoholic.

One of my first tasks during my second period was to redesign twelve of the original twenty-one training centres. Money was becoming tight due to the long delays in having starts made and consequent inflation. Further, the original designs were too lavish in some respects and too inflexible in others. They reflected a supply-driven approach instead of than catering for the reality regarding the market for skilled trainees in the smaller towns and villages. It’s not often that a quantity surveyor has the opportunity to be an architect. I took on the challenge with a lot of enthusiasm and gusto. I felt it allowed me the unusual opportunity to leave my individualist mark on some of the infrastructure of Pakistan.

I prepared the outline layouts based on criteria such as the number of places, access to central power facilities, light etc. These were then passed over to a firm of local architects and engineers to detail in the local traditional manner. Thus, we came up with a basic template, which we could change for the women’s centres by providing higher walls and greater seclusion, or for the NWFP, where they insisted on sheet metal roofs – the latter almost over my dead body because in Summer I realised the metal would reflect heat like a battery, while in winter it would lose heat and be miserable to work in. I battled hard. The locals were adamant that sheet metal was more up-market and that was the way they wanted it. They wouldn’t be using the building and therefore they were not concerned with my protestations. No way would they trust the skill of the local labour force with proper construction. I resigned myself and they ultimately got their way. God help the poor trainees and staff.

Things went well with the first of the new projects. The site was Dera Murad Jamali, a village in Baluchistan not far from Sibi, at the bottom of the Bolan Pass and about a half-day’s drive south of Quetta. Incidentally, Sibi is notorious as one of the hottest places on the whole sub-continent. The local training people in the Department in Quetta were anxious to show they could out-compete the wealthier provinces. There were some little touches and a claim or two conceded before the builder was appointed. I used to visit the site as part of a regular routine about once every six weeks. The local Director saw these visits as bestowing a high profile, as if some sense of glamour was passed on by each such visit. If I didn’t turn up I had to provide convincing excuses. I liked the people and so I turned up regularly.

Then on one visit I noticed the column foundations in one area were uneven. I remonstrated with the resident engineer and politely pointed it out to the contractor. He agreed and promised to remedy the situation. Six weeks later the grid of columns were up about three or four metres and about twenty degrees off vertical. They knew they were wrong but hoped I wouldn’t notice and that even if I did, that I wouldn’t be too hard on them. Inevitably, in the local way they’d patch it up one way or another.

It was a day in high summer when you didn’t want to be in the open for too long. My credibility was at stake, as word would soon go around all the contractors as regards the quality of work I was prepared to accept. I asked for a sledge-hammer and tried manfully to fracture one of the offending columns. I struck it about ten times, after which I nearly fainted with heatstroke. I always recall the response of the somewhat
chastened contractor. “So good of the Sahib to take so much interest and to point out our mistakes to us!”

It was during the monsoon rains they decided to put up the temporary scaffolding and pour the in-situ concrete roof beams. The ground was damp and muddy and lo! and behold! – as the weight came on the temporary supports a number of the putlogs sank into the ground with a distorting effect on the profile of the roof beams. Indeed, it gave the roof profile something of a Moghul droop instead of the original straight profiled effects that were sought. It wasn’t that much of a distortion – but there was a distortion. I called for an examination to be made by a local firm of civil engineers who would report to me. Of course, I already knew I was licked. No way, was the contractor going to suffer the cost of removing the beams and re-pouring them. The report vindicated the contractor and, when I received it in Islamabad I smiled and pondered on the efficacy achieved by another exchange of brown envelopes. On the other hand, I reflected that in the first place the factors of safety were high and the contractor had a reputation for not saving too severely on the cement mix. I had to accept the word of the locally appointed resident engineer. That’s what he was there for! Overall for all twenty one projects I did my best by overseeing the tendering competitions and subsequently visiting the sites to ensure compliance. By personally attending these events and making regular site visits I did manage to stop some absurdities.

Compare this approach with a massive school building programme of several thousand primary schools in the Punjab province. I think I may have referred to it earlier. The central administration after some years began to be concerned about issues of illiteracy in particular villages, where schools had been built and teachers were being paid from the central funds. In a unique move, the Punjab Secretary of Education sent the army in to carry out a count of the schools. On completion of the count they discovered several hundred “ghost schools” which had been paid for and for which “ghost teachers” were being paid. This happened during my time and the Lahori newspapers were full of the scandal.

Another comparison: the local Comptroller General in Punjab carried out a survey of training centres and schools - not mine – and built by a multi-donor financed team. He took photographs of how the school buildings provided were being used. The survey revealed a variety of uses other than the use intended. Some were used by the villagers for storing grain or for sheltering their animals. One in particular was being used as a brothel! In seeking good standards I really did my best. I was recognised to be trying hard. However, if you had the Minister, the local civil servants, or the senior officials as well as the contractor at loggerheads with you – it just was not always possible to hold out for the higher standards. The option was to recommend the termination of the projects and to consign them then to exist as solitary skeletons on the landscape and of use to neither God nor Man – or to temporise to some extent!

Over time and against this resistance the expatriate begins to be worn down mentally and morally or to have to accept a relatively short personal sell-by date. This is a very common problem and I hope illustrates the disadvantage in leaving an expatriate in position for long durations. The developing world is full of stories of experts digging in and spending seven to ten years in place. It’s not a good approach.
But to conclude; there in Baluchistan as well as in some other locations in the other provinces will be found some evidence of my handiwork. I wish the communities well and hope that whatever the purpose for which they are being used that they will contribute in one way or another to the benefit of these communities. I have made the initial designs for several centres. It will be something I will have left behind me. I trust they won’t all be blots on the landscape. I certainly hope they will escape the fate of being taken over by the army and used as temporary barracks as happened to an earlier generation of training centres.

Shimla (Simla): The Summer capital of the Viceroy just across the border in India. During the Raj this area was out of bounds to Indian natives. Scandal corner is only a few yards away.

Adjusting to the country

Pakistan, since its creation in 1947 has been a confessional state. Before very long the visitor learns that this is very far from the relatively secular state he has been used to. In public, there is a continuous reference to belief in Allah and of a polity, which appears to devote itself to maintaining the precepts of Islam. There is for the foreigner almost an inordinate attention to religion. Rarely, if ever, has a Pakistani friend or colleague ever unburdened himself to me in a way that could be construed as critical of Islam. Neither would they allow me see them doing or not doing their religious observances.

I have never heard open criticism of the nature of the state of Pakistan or of the decision made to rip the sub-continent in two in order to achieve it. This is in direct contrast to comments on political parties on which everyone had a sharply critical view. This is the case even though for much of the time since its independence Pakistan has been a failed political entity when, as now, it has been governed by a military junta or when civil war or sectarian feuding has raged in several provinces as occurred during my time there. I can think of only a couple of instances: one was when our much loved local secretary joined us for biscuits during Ramazan and the other when one of my drivers explained that in Pakistan, a Muslim state, there existed a caste system. On the other hand walking along the seashore in Karachi with a
businessman friend he groaned and sadly and slowly asserted his belief that if Pakistanis could sell their country – they would – as he believed they had done with nearly everything else!

No, Pakistan was forged as a confessional entity. Its origins are explained by the perceived needs of its Muslim population to be masters in their own house. This need was based on the huge sense of self-esteem and a despising of other faiths which shared the historical and geographical landscape. Could this rupture of the old India have been avoided? It appears to be highly unlikely. So many advocates existed for separation. Then violence comes easily to this area and foments and further copper fastens division. The irony is that a high level of sectarian violence mars most of the provinces to this day and especially in Sind and the Punjab. The difference is that this time it is Muslim on Muslim, even Sunni on Sunni! This is in contrast with the situation just across the border in India where there is a greater Muslim population living than in Pakistan and where they cohabit reasonably well and peacefully with their Hindu and Sikh compatriots.

Jinna is the iconic figure and father of Pakistan. His thin ascetic face stares down at you in every government office. However, he himself was liberal and even though a Muslim he drank alcohol, smoked and he eat ham. It is recorded that Jinna never wanted to go as far as setting up a separate independent state – but that after sowing the wind and raising expectations he could not ride the tiger and his more extreme followers railroaded it through.

It is difficult to imagine that only about fifty years ago that there had been no border with India. That people drove up to Shimla in a day from the Western Pakistani

28 My host, a maharajah in Shimla, remembered his father going to have breakfast with Jinna. When Jinna asked what he would like to eat he foreswore ham so as not to offend. Jinna had his ham and enjoyed it!

29 The Summer Capital of the Raj in Himalcar Pradesh.
Punjab to get away from the summer heat and that the Grand Trunk Road continued from Lahore to Delhi.

There are many references to the horrors of partition. Atrocities were committed on both sides. It would not have been difficult to start uproar in these populous towns with Muslims and Hindus living together cheek by jowl. Apparently, to start a pogrom all that was required was for some maniac to throw a cow’s head into the Hindu temple. Hindus retorted by throwing a pig’s head, profane to Muslims into the mosque or by singing outside it. I was on several occasions informed that Hindus in the Pakistani Punjab were wealthy, educated and operated as moneylenders while the Muslims were essentially the hewers of wood and drawers of water.

That may have been the case to some degree – but only to a degree. Both populations were so large. Travelling through Lahore or Rawalpindi one often comes across a number of deserted and rundown Hindu temples. In the countryside, the presence of the very distinctive banyan tree was usually a sign that there was or that there had existed a Hindu temple close by.

There is intimidation of the few Hindus who have remained just as there is of the vulnerable Christian community. In all my time in Pakistan I only came across one Hindu. He was a junior government official and an engineer working for the ministry in Quetta. He did not appear to be ostracised in any way. On the other hand even though we often travelled for days together he couldn’t be drawn into discussing his family fortunes. During the nineteen nineties, after the Ayodhia mosque was destroyed across the border by the right-wing Hindu party adherents I was informed in confidence by several Pakistani sources that the repercussions in Pakistan against the Hindu community were much more severe. It was estimated that of the order of a hundred Hindu temples were attacked or destroyed in retaliation. On the other hand, I did meet a couple of mixed blood British-Indians. They seemed to be none the worst for that although the people I met were all Muslims.

While there are many sites throughout Pakistan holy to the Hindu religion, there is not much evidence of cross-border visitation. This does not seem to apply to the Sikhs, who were once dominant in the Punjab until the arrival of the British. They have a holy site on the Grand Trunk Road just a few kilometres north of Islamabad. On many occasions I have encountered them in their colourful turbans at Lahore airport as they embarked or disembarked from their pilgrimages.

In Pakistani society the local Christians are at the bottom layer. The state of the Christian slums, even in modern urban Islamabad, is just one instance of this prejudice. As noted above most Christians in Pakistan are descended from the ‘untouchables’ who converted during British rule just as many did to Islam under the earlier Mughals although not all. The recent horrible massacre of Christian worshippers in a Punjab town, as a reaction to the US bombing in Afghanistan, was not unknown during my time - although thankfully it was not on that scale. The extremely spiritual Sufi saints played a major role in the conversion of many people of Hindu or other religions, especially in the territory of the present day Pakistan.
I have always felt it was a pity that the present political generation in Pakistan has failed to take into account its wonderful and colourful heritage. This was particularly the case with regard to Taxila or the Gandhara sites, or indeed the earlier Harappan and Indus valley sites of more than five thousand years ago for which the government makes little provision. Harappa has all but disappeared: its bricks being used for railway construction. I was very disappointed when I visited it. Future generations will be grateful to the several British visionaries such as Kipling’s father who established the museums in Taxila, Lahore and Peshawar and who have thus recorded something of this superb history. Perhaps it is still too soon coming after the truly awful atrocities committed by both sides at the time of partition.

A brief examination of social mores

Amongst the middle class there exists a system of arranged marriages. Given that people I knew were well educated and sophisticated I found this difficult to understand. Arranged marriages may keep the land together but often marriages took place between cousins – even first cousins. Somewhere else I have mentioned a descendent of the Moghul emperors whose family had always married with first cousins. I rarely came across couples of love marriages or who had sacrificed something to enter a relationship, which had been frowned upon by the extended family. This was an area where it was more prudent for a Westerner not to pry too deeply but occasionally, the veil was lifted.

I worked closely with a couple that were both architects. The man had a doctorate and they both had lived for part of their lives in Australia. Travelling overland to monitor progress on sites his wife explained that she was directly descended from the Prophet’s family and her immediate family had substantial land holdings around
Bahawalpur, in the South of the Punjab. Her brothers explained to her when she announced her intention to marry that they would go so far as to kill her husband to prevent him coming into possession of this land. As a result they moved, fairly rapidly I would say, to Australia. Afterwards her husband who in many ways had Western views formally waived any inheritance rights and was grudgingly accepted back into Pakistan.

In a lighter vein when passing through one of her ancestor’s estates this same lady amused me greatly with her Raj stories of the appetites of the younger male grandees to visit the British motherland and to meet the Queen/Empress. She instanced a couple of cases when they brought back new English wives. These were usually not from the top social drawer but being British and with the Raj Rules applying they had to be looked after properly. This had an effect on the normal inheritance patterns when the estate had to be shared with the new lady. She instanced one situation where the lady used to sunbathe on the bungalow roof with little on and as might be expected caused great scandal.

On the other hand, amongst the middle class men I knew socially it seemed they were always preoccupied with affairs. One man I knew was having an affair with the wife of a fundamentalist political leader in Lahore. This politician had a number of armed retainers and he would be exonerated, indeed he would be expected to assassinate my friend, had he found out the situation. In a country where it is taboo under any circumstances to be seen with a woman who is not your mother, wife or sister, huge time and attention is given to planning even the shortest assignation. I would occasionally be telephoned by some of these friends in Lahore to establish when my apartment in Islamabad could be available. One man explained that in order to put people off the scent he was flying first to Karachi and then to Islamabad to meet his ladylove. She would fly direct. I didn’t like the idea of sharing my accommodation and it never happened.

Again, I received many requests for alcohol – for the lady of course. I was able to assist in these matters. But to me it appeared so ridiculous for grown men always to be behaving like adolescents. The men boasted amongst themselves of their affairs. It seemed to be the main sport and the riskier the assignation – the better. It was resented when after interminable discussions often over my whiskey that I should get bored with the subject. One friend explained to me that even if a woman was wearing the burca he could establish whether she was beautiful or not by the way she moved. I was glad I had never been so desperate! But in a country where the well-dressed man and husbands usually sported a Kalashnikov such liaisons sailed very close to the wind.

This was at the pinnacle of Pakistani society where there was a close-knit community and an urbanity, which allowed for a degree of tolerance. The situation as you went lower in society I was assured is much harsher, especially for a woman found in a liaison. My friends had wealth and could travel or could pay off for their indiscretions. In contrast, I was told that traditionally the poor have nothing but their face. For a wronged man to lose his dignity was the greatest come down in his society. It was seen as grounds for wreaking a cruel revenge.
Some short impressions of the provinces

Pakistan is a federation and the governance is exercised through a federal government with the federal parliament located in Islamabad, the administrative capital in the Federal Capital Area. There are four provincial governments consisting of the provincial governments of Punjab, Sindh, the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Each province is very different both in terms of the peoples, topography and for me the degree of civilised standards prevailing.

Punjab is the largest province in terms of population. It lies adjacent to the Indian Punjab. The imperial (Moghul) city of Lahore is the cultural capital of the country. There is a proud saying of the Lahoris, which they proclaim regularly and only half in jest, “Lahore is Lahore”.

![Attending a Shura (meeting) in the Tribal Areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Note the male only attendance, our escorts, the comfortable charpoys and the less inviting Kalashnikovs.](image)

The North West Frontier Province - or NWFP

The North West Frontier Province - or NWFP as it was always referred to - is a wild place and yet it is leavened with some very decent and sensitive people. For me coming from Ireland there was an unexpected familiarity. One surprise was when I, a product of an Irish school, came up against the fact that I could use Irish numbers to count in the bazaar. All bar one digit below ten are the same, or sound the same. Punjab means five rivers and could the Irish “cuigh” be derived from an accented “Punj”? The Ab is clearly linked to Abha in Gaelic. It owes this similarity to a common origin in Sanskrit. Then, while everywhere over the sub-continent there are the darker skins and brown eyes, but up in the heart of the North West Frontier Province and in the tribal areas it is not uncommon to meet fair skinned men who you

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30 Khyber Paktunkhwa since 2010.
might pass without comment on O’Connell Bridge in Dublin. But again, it is wise not to be too familiar with such people.

There in the NWFP, it can be a both surprise as well as not a little intimidating to find that unlike his Irish contemporaries this gentleman has a very different attitude to the fair sex. He immures the lady or ladies in his fortified house and if perhaps he comes upon you spying on them – then you may fear for your life. It is a country where it is wise to give the ladies a wide berth. The Pashtuns or Pathans who inhabit the tribal areas are more than protective of their women. I always enjoyed the description of the Pathans’ fascination with zar, zan and zamin: gold, women and land. They are famous for their feuding and for extracting pitiless revenge, even over generations. The word “cousin” signifies enemy to these haughty people.

In addition to the NWFP province itself there are the federally administered areas of FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) adjacent to Afghanistan and to the north the Northern Areas. These latter are the high mountain areas to the north of the country bordering on China and of course India and the much fought over Szechwan Glacier where an active confrontation took place for years between the two armies at above twenty thousand feet in freezing temperatures. It is a savage and dramatic landscape with towering mountains such as K2, Nanga Parbat and Rakaposhi, which overlooks the Hunza Valley.

The Swat Valley and the Malachand Pass

“We visited Peshawar again and spent Friday in the Swat valley. In the distance we could see the snow-capped 16,000 feet foothills of the Himalayas. Swat is accessible over a 9,000 feet pass and inside it’s very Alpine and beautiful. In Raj times the river was stocked with Scottish trout which have survived and thrive”.
On the way down the Karakoram Highway, which links Pakistan with China, the road in a steep valley was blocked by a rock slide. We waited three hours to have it cleared and I reckon we were lucky to get back here around midnight last night. I’ve bought a water bottle. It’s essential here. However, the weather is now beautiful at about 25 degrees.”

**Peshawar: the centre of administration for the NWFP**

Modern Peshawar has everything for the adventurous. Wonderful bazaars where you can negotiate and buy anything from the most sophisticated and beautiful carpets to cameras and high powered Japanese binoculars, that appeared only yesterday to have fallen off the relevant factory truck. It appears to be a frontier town and so it has been for millennia, sitting astride the old trading routes into Afghanistan and Iran and north into the central Asian interior. Every shape and physiognomy is to be seen – from the Chinese to the Tartar, to the Tajik and all the pastoral peoples who true to age-old tradition follow their herds during summer to the high mountain pastures and, on the onset of winter, lead them back down south for hundreds of kilometres to safer pastures deep down in Punjab.

In the centre of Peshawar just opposite that fine watering hole, the Pearl Continental, is the magnificent fortress built by the British no doubt on an earlier Moghul fortification to protect the area in depth from invasion across the Khyber Pass. The Mughals would certainly have been aware of its vulnerability as that was the way the Moghul Emperor Akbar came down to conquer India. To the North and East was “the Great Game” territory where the British lion kept a close and anxious interest in the possibility of cross border and trans-Himalayan intrigues between the Czar’s agents to the adjoining territories to the north and the local NWFP tribal chiefs and the Sikh nobility over in Kashmir. The fortress was built to contain the threat and obviously meant, and still means business.
Slightly before my time the city was patronised heavily by CIA types who traded with the Mujahedeen from Afghanistan. During the war with the Russians the Mujahedeen were supplied with some sophisticated armament including US Stinger surface-to-air missiles. In my time, the Americans were making every effort to buy them back; offering US$100,000 apiece, a good deal for what had originally been given as a present. Towards the end of my time during a spot of disorder up in the Malachand area, the helicopter of a Pakistan army general was sent tumbling down by a mountainy man equipped with said Stinger. In general, people in Pakistan may sometimes appear simple and bucolic. They are not simple; and especially when it comes to warring together. On the other hand as noted earlier down in the Punjab near Lahore I have seen these seemingly simple people in their remote villages hook up their televisions to a satellite disk and sit back and enjoy the sexy Indian dance videos.

The Americans have left their impression in Peshawar during the brief time they were there. High on the list in a dry country is the American Club where you can buy a T-bone steak, if you can get it, and wash it down with a long cool beer. This in my time was a very important element of the Pax Americana.

The Pearl Continental Hotel was used a lot by the UN agencies. I hope it still exists and has escaped the fate of its counterpart the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad which was blown up recently with great loss of life. It too was a source of liquor – at a price. On the top floor was a bar. Very basic in general furnishings, it was made plain to us all that the bar men considered us to be children of a lesser God, if not somewhat depraved. Depraved we may well have been but there was little chance to practice such an avocation. We dutifully submitted, signed up a book and showed our passports and bought a booze license. I found it very useful to leaf through the license book to discover which other of my friends had been debauching recently in the bar.
Booze was available on order to your room. There the barmen were not so closely scrutinised and for a tip and of course the price they would produce miracles. The booze was always wrapped in black plastic bags and could be noticed in the corridors at a hundred metres. In my time and in its own way Peshawar had the ‘El Paso’ feel to it. Everywhere the well-dressed man wouldn’t go out without his armed retainers and his trusty Kalashnikov. The lobby of the Pearl Continental is famous for its notice to deposit firearms with reception. The photograph I took (see above) will explain the very natural concerns of the management to keep a quiet house.

A photograph of a petroglyph or plaque to the Buddha created by earlier Chinese pilgrims who traversed the very difficult terrain along trails comprising Silk Routes through the Himalayan passes cut out by the Upper Indus where the Indian sub-continental and the Asian tectonic plates crush into each other.

Azad (Free) Kashmir

About 60 kilometres east of the capital Islamabad is the Pakistani administered third of the territories of Jammu and Kashmir, which are disputed with India and which are called Azad (Free) Kashmir. This is an area which is often under fire and where the ISI (Pakistani intelligence services) support the transfer of mujahedeen across the border for the conflict in Kashmir. It’s a permanent flash point. It is doubtful if these territories will ever be relinquished by Pakistan even to an autonomous Kashmiri administration.

Access is forbidden to UN personnel except for those directly involved as military observers of the cease-fire line between the two. These once-lucky colleagues would fly in a UN plane across to Srinagar, the Kashmiri winter capital with its beautiful lakes and elegant ornately carved houseboats. Unfortunately, since the confrontation intensified some time before my arrival, life had become very difficult in the disputed areas and there was a running civil war of independence or terrorism, depending on which side of the border you stood.
The Imperial city of Lahore and the Punjab

Lahore is magnificent with its shady malls, canals and the old Moghul Fort (so similar to the Red Fort in Delhi), the Badshashi Mosque and the other Mogul remains and Gardens. In Moghul times it was the favoured residence of several emperors who embellished it or are entombed here. One story brings this era alive. The emperor Akbar had as one of his wives the beautiful Anarkali. One day he happened to notice her smiling at his son and like Browning’s poem “He gave commands” and she was immured alive in the walls of a new building – now located in the Anarkali Market.

The wonderful magic and enigmatic Badshashi Mosque towards dusk
(Courtesy of Microsoft Atlas: This is a better photograph than I could take).

The Jinna Library is a building in the classical Greek style. It was originally a British gentleman’s club. Shortly after independence the new masters, the local Lahori elite applied for membership. They were refused and so they simply evicted the old colonial gentlemen and took it over and converted it into the Jinna library. How it must have appalled the old set and how they were rewarded for their obduracy! The library is situated in a spectacularly beautiful formal park, dating from the Raj. There one views the resident huge white-backed vultures perched in the trees. There are colonies of fruit bats, hoopoes, Himalayan whistling thrushes etc., etc.

It’s ironic to think that only 20 miles away from Lahore is the border with India and just across is the historic city of Amritsar and its Golden Temple of the Sikhs.

31 My last Duchess.
32 Her lover the Moghul Jahangir eventually himself became emperor and made some amends writing a moving and romantic lament for her.
Amritsar is the site of one of the last atrocities of the British in these parts when General Dyer had a peaceful demonstration cut down by his troops. He was never subsequently brought to serious account for it. Anyway, the formalities and the time required to cross that border made it impossible for me as a resident of Pakistan to visit Amritsar.

Moghul Lahore: Looking from the Fort to the Badshashi Mosque.

The hinterland outside the main cities in the Punjab is enormous. The land is amazingly fertile and will grow anything and fast. The terrain is flat, criss-crossed with huge irrigation systems providing water for sugar, cotton and other crops and often remote from an administrative point-of-view.

I once carried out a final assessment of a basic education programme where between the various government agencies, the World Bank and other donors it was impossible to calculate how many schools had been built or where they were located. We compromised at an agreed figure of ten thousand, give or take a few! Life in the countryside appears to be very traditional - as it mostly is - and based as in India on the village as nucleus. That can be deceptive. There is television under the thatched roofs and although officially dry there as everywhere there is a local alcohol. The elders like to tap into Indian TV from across the border for the sexy Bollywood films and videos. It’s ironic sometimes to see these venerable old turbaned heads with eyes gleaming as they discuss and shout their approval or disapproval for some sexy lady on the video screen. However, it’s strictly a men-only situation.

The Province of Sindh

Sindh is the next most populated province to the Punjab. There is a “manana” feel about much of its identity at least to me as a foreigner. This was confirmed by friends
I made there. It was certainly the easiest place to make friends. Sindh was the entry point of Islam into Pakistan. There are the remains of exceedingly ancient mosques, dating if I recall correctly, from the eighth and ninth centuries. There are still to be found the venerated families who claim descent directly from the family of the prophet. One scion of such a family explained that he had had a long affair with a girl in FÁS when he came over to Ireland on a vocational education exchange. She decided against following him back to Sindh and becoming his second or third wife. His earlier wives were the result of arranged marriages. He was tall angular and good-looking and might I thought have been a happy choice.

There is an oral tradition of music and courtliness and general colour in Sindh, which to me marks it as different from the blandness of much of the rest of the Pakistani population. It feels more like across the border in India. The people are very proud of this temperament. They are not so obsessed with India and indeed they do a huge trade in smuggling across the border. The elite families continue to marry across into India.

My escort on a site visit to a training centre under construction in deepest Sindh

Karachi is the capital of Sindh and the commercial centre of Pakistan. It’s situated on the sea but the seafront smells of all sorts of decaying matter. Ashore, it is high tech with all sorts of black software and hardware cheaply available. It has huge leather shops and is reckoned to be one of the best and one of the cheapest places for buying cameras in the world. For the duration of my stay it was riven by the continuous bloodlettings that took place between the traditional landowner political class and the MQM, whose ancestors had transferred there from India during and following partition.

The traditional Sindh landowning class are called fuedals, although this title is not solely restricted to landowners in Sindh. These fuedals are accustomed to privilege. They hold enormous estates, which they dominate. Their word holds sway in the
countryside where they even have private jails for those who obstruct their power – if they are lucky to survive at all! Sindh has the Tar desert and the lower Indus with the magnificent, truly magnificent, barrage across it at Sukkur.

Sindh was a province in which I always availed of an escort. I had two unforgettable experiences in Karachi during my first time there with the UN. On one occasion a fire-fight started up very close to the provincial government offices I was in and looked as if it was going to be even more serious. At the insistence of the local Director I was spirited away back to my hotel and in the vehicle; forced to lie on the floor for my own protection and covered by the bodies of my Sindhi counterparts. While I was extremely grateful to them I felt they were taking too many risks. On another occasion as I was about to depart from Karachi overland for Quetta, being driven in the armoured four wheel drive of one of the self-same fuedals in the government service my driver arrived with a small bullet hole through the windscreen, which had happened just as he turned into the hotel to collect me. We took off out of there pretty fast!

On a later visit to Sindh during my programming mission in March 2002 I and my two male companions were inducted into the sad practices which take place in the poorer areas of the interior. There we were informed by a lady from the Aga Khan Development Agency that girl children are just about tolerated. They are certainly not loved and are considered and apparently consider themselves to be of the brute kind: reduced to being bearers of wood and carriers of water. As a rule with these fairly primitive tribes it is forbidden to express love or any personal emotion. I was assured that love matches were not tolerated and the verdict would be death for both involved parties. They are married off to a convenient relation when they reach the age of fourteen. The spouse may be an old man of fifty or a boy of two. We Westerners discussed this unceasingly; we all found it impossible to imagine a family life without affection and love.

As a way of promoting development the local agents of the European Commission, the Aga Khan and some other agencies, spent time winning the confidence of the village elders and then convinced them it was necessary to educate and train the young women for all sorts of reasons. Someone who can write or teach hygiene and the advantages this would bring to the communities - whatever would convince the villagers. Initially, they took the girls all escorted by the fathers and brothers to a safe hostel, taught them basic hygiene and gave them wage earning skills and the methods for teaching language and writing skills.

We saw these young ladies who indeed had been transformed. They were happy, good-looking girls busy at their studies. We wondered about the future clash of cultures when they returned with their new attitudes and learning and confronted the age old cultures of the region. Would they survive? Would they keep their new found self-possession and dignity? We feared for them and their futures and prayed they would!

The Province of Baluchistan

The fourth province, Baluchistan, is an enormous almost empty area to the west, with Quetta as its capital. In terms of natural gas and minerals it has enormous untapped
potential. Strategically it could be on any line bringing oil from the central Asian republics to the deep water port of Karachi or to Gwadar. Outside Quetta, it is thinly populated. It borders on Iran and Afghanistan to the west. Since the start of hostilities in Afghanistan some thirty years ago many Afghans have crossed the border for refuge and have established refugee camps and gradually have integrated into the population where there were already many Pathan traditionally living. In common with the NWFP women’s’ rights are tightly circumscribed.

The Balochis only account for four or five million out of a total of about one hundred and twenty five million total population of Pakistan. Theirs is the poorest province and receives hand-outs from the federal purse. They are deeply suspicious of the designs that the other provinces especially Punjab may have on their rights. Life is hard there for the poor. In the mountains isolated groups of miners in family groups dig deep vertical trenches to take out the coal. They disappear deep below without any form of safety gear. It is very dangerous. Many of them die either from asphyxiations or from landslides. It is a lawless society with factions, clan chiefs and numerous armed retainers. An ex-Irish Army friend of mine lived there for several years and I visited him fairly frequently. One day directly outside his house there was a shoot-out between two factions. More than twenty were killed with many more wounded.

The City of Quetta with encircling high mountains from outside the Serena Hotel

I was very impressed with Quetta. It’s a town of about 300,000 people and is situated on a plateau at six thousand feet above sea level. The plateau appears to be about twenty miles wide in both directions and surrounded and almost overwhelmed by snow-capped mountains. The plane coming in to land literally swoops in and out between the mountains. There were always a number of F16s standing on the tarmac or in reinforced concrete shelters. You heard their shattering noise as they exercised over the city.
In the Raj days it was the site of a famous cavalry school. General Montgomery of World War II fame spent time here. It’s less than seventy miles from the Afghanistan border and originally was established as a forward base by the British to hold back any Afghan incursions. It really feels isolated. There was a devastating earthquake in the nineteen thirties which levelled many parts of the city and killed thousands of the population. In my mind’s eye I see it thronged with mountainy men with fierce beards and wearing the equivalent of a double bed sheet tied judiciously around their heads. I thought they were the genuine Ali Babas! There is plenty of hardware around to remind you of Afghanistan. I also remember numbers of unfortunate people begging on crutches; their feet blown away by mines.

It can be cool especially at night. It’s fairly laid back. On one occasion I surprised the people in the Ministry by avoiding the planned reception and arriving by Tonga (horse drawn taxi) at eight o clock or two hours before I was expected. There was some shock and awe when they came in to work to see me waiting for them but it was a pleasure to work with them.

There is a strange feeling for the lone Westerner there, especially in the bazaars where one’s every move is followed closely by tall fierce bearded Afghans or their local cousins. It was always full of surprises. I once wrote home: “Afterwards I went strolling through the bazaar where I was the only Westerner. I couldn't resist buying a Baluch carpet with a flower pattern predominantly blue ochre and red for 3,500 rupees. It’s about 4 feet by 2 feet, the same as the one you left with me. I suppose it doesn't count as one of the two you have ordered. It’s very beautiful. I bought a 4” diameter by 1” deep brass sighting compass complete with mirror, levelling tube and sighting pieces. It precedes the prismatic compass and is truly one of the most beautiful things I have seen. It was probably used by the British army in the last century to plot their progress through the deserts. You will like it very much on the mantelpiece, if there's room on the mantelpiece.”

Being the poorest province it is, as might be expected, quite corrupt in its public life. It lauds its identity as an Islamic state and yet with a group I was invited on call by the chief provincial officials to a barbeque high up in the mountains outside Quetta where we roistered drinking beer obtained from the local Christians and imported spirits until the early hours around flaming pits with sheep carcasses being slowly turned on a spit. That evening, unbeknown to me as I stretched out on an Afghan carpet some insect bit my ankle, which flamed and swelled up the following day causing me to hobble about on a walking stick. The pain and the swelling stayed with me for several weeks.

Before the Second World War, an Irish nurse from Kerry working in one of the London hospitals, married a young Sindhi doctor. She came home with him to Sindh and discovered he was already married. As an Irish colleague living in Balochistan and who knew her observed that she was practical and so she decided to accept the position and to get on with the senior first wife. In time, she bore a son and consolidated her position. During the lead up to the partition of India in 1947 when Jinna, the Pakistani leader, was engaged in the most sensitive of negotiations she nursed him in his final days secretly in his village in Laurali, outside Quetta, rather than have it be known he was dying of cancer. Had his condition been known Nehru and the Indians might have found a way to defer the split up of the sub-continent.
Anyway, for this patriotic service to the young nation she was given the status of an honorary man. Her son later became a Foreign Minister of Pakistan. It’s an interesting anecdote. My friend often offered to set up a meeting with her for me – but unfortunately it never transpired. Strangely enough the lady survived until January 2008 when I read her dignified obituary in the Irish Times.

Balochis until recently had the right to Omani citizenship. Until title to Baluchistan was bought from Oman by one of the Pakistani military presidents and transferred to the state, Oman had some kind of title to the area. I found this snippet of information intriguing as on subsequent travel to East Africa I discovered that Zanzibar also had been established as another part of the Omani fiefdom.

One of the greatest engineering feats of the Raj was the building of a railway connection from Sibi, one of the hottest places in the whole sub-continent, up some three thousand feet through the Bolan Pass onto the Quetta plateau. It constitutes a major engineering feat and must have been hugely expensive to build. The cost must have easily been offset by its enormous strategic value and the way it ensured that Quetta, a forward defensive position facing onto Afghanistan could be reinforced at short notice.

Quetta and Baluchistan generally have a well-earned reputation for lawlessness. Travelling there under UN regulations I was required to arrange for armed protection with the provincial government. It was usually quite casual. I didn’t ask for them. But there were still precautions to be taken. I noted how invariably as he came with me into the 4x4 from Quetta down the Bolan Pass to Sibi – a spectacular journey - the local official accompanying me would first deposit his loaded revolver in the glove compartment. Traversing it, and I once had an unusual experience, I always

33 I noticed my driver was in difficulties going down the Pass. As it was not unusual for people to have sudden recurring attacks of malaria, I offered to drive instead. He agreed but said “Sahib, be careful – the brakes are not working!”
marvelled at how and in such a tight valley the railway planners had managed to reduce the gradients and to make them passable.

I always tried to time my coming for Wednesday evening. Every Wednesday evening the local expatriates and their trusted Balochi friends would have a social evening with liquor available. It was great fun. The men and women working there were an interesting group of people. They were usually involved on projects straddling the border with Afghanistan. The atmosphere was charged further by the risk of being discovered with alcohol. The local expatriate UN personnel including my Irish friend always maintained they preferred Quetta with its cold climate and all its hardships to the more genteel atmosphere of Islamabad.

Once while traversing the Pass we encountered a cloud of locusts. It was amazing the number of them darkened the sky for an hour. There was no sense of fear or claustrophobia just a little anxiousness in case they blocked up the air intake. There were mounds of them inactive and probably dead all over the landscape. I had heard that I could expect them from my UN friends. They caused enormous hardship for the local farmers and the UN would provide the Pakistani Air Force with huge amounts of insecticide spray to counter their attacks.

Some further glimpses off the circuit

I have chosen this sub-title to highlight the transient nature of my frequent visits to the interior of all four provinces, Azad Kashmir and the Tribal and Northern Areas. My job involved extensive travel and covered sites from Gwadar on the Arabian Sea to the interior of Sindh, Baluchistan, several sites in the Punjab and three sites in the North West Frontier province. Many of these visits involved a detour away from particular construction sites or took place after meetings with the provincial authorities. Others, such as the Margalla Hills or Taxila near to Islamabad were much-loved places I often visited.

Visits to particular areas in Sindh such as Mohenjodaro or sites outside Sukkur were only possible with agreement of the local police or military authorities which then provided a military escort. A similar regimen applied in Baluchistan, for most of Azad Kashmir and the Tribal and high mountains in the Northern Areas. Thus through my role as inspecting architect I was lucky to be able to visit most places in this most challenging country. I became the envy of many of my colleagues whose work confined them to the major conurbations and who therefore experienced little of the real life as lived in the rural communities. As an architect, albeit more a project manager, I had considerable dealings with the local authorities and District Commissioners.
Mindful of the fact that this memoir has been prepared primarily for the delectation of my close family and friends in writing about these visitations and especially about the work visits to the many sites I do it in the hope that sometime in the future – even in the distant future some relation or descendant may find herself or himself for whatever reason following in my footsteps.

The River Indus and the Karakorum Highway

The Indus rushes down the gorge coming from Kashmir and runs almost due South and parallel and below the Karakoram Highway, almost from Gilgit to the Moghul fortress of Attock, where it enters the Punjab and where it is joined by the Kabul River; a very beautiful place. Thus, it traverses part of the Northern Territories before entering the North West Frontier Province. The views are spectacular along the Karakoram. Narrow, eight metre wide roads overlook a sheer drop of three to five hundred metres to the river below. Driving along it you encounter slow laden trucks trundling along and passing each other out with centimetres to spare.

The road is a major challenge especially if overtaking on hairpin bends. Trucks and flying coaches traverse it day and night and winter and summer. Accidents often happen. I once watched a dare where two flying coaches full of supporters travelling to a political gathering attempted to see how far they could ease each other over the side – before calling “halt”. I was dumbstruck as the passengers egged on their respective drivers. Perhaps it is because under Islam it is believed to be proper to
delegate one’s end, its timing and its manner to Allah, who knows all. Insurance policies were never much valued by the locals anyway.

The Karakoram Highway is a lifeline for access and for trade. Travelling north one reaches as far as Gilgit which in Raj times was known to be the most isolated part of the British Empire. The Highway continues up to the Chinese border over the Khungerab Pass, which at fifteen thousand feet is the highest metalled pass in the world. There on the plateau well to the north of Hunza and the Cathedral Range the sharply defined and craggy Karakorums give way to the immensely large and rounded Pamirs, stretching all the way into China. A group of us went up to the pass over the highway at very high altitude. Some were sick. Others, including me were so exhilarated and tried to chase after orange mammutsh who looked from the distance like great big ginger Toms or the Yaks, the huge shaggy high mountain cattle.

On 15th July it was snowing there. Earlier on a rock outcrop over the Indus and just outside Gilgit, one could behold the world’s three greatest mountain ranges the Himalayas across the Indus, the Hindu Kush behind and to the north the Karakorums. Stirring stuff!

Up in Hunza which was often referred to as the real location of the legendary Shangri-La could be seen elderly men in discussion amongst the beautiful orchards. I came across the retired brother of the Mir of Hunza. He had been a senior officer in the Pakistani Air Force. He assured us he owed his life to preference by the British. Traditionally on the succession of his brother as Mir he would have expected to be assassinated. There was not room for two. Traditionally in this area and in adjacent Baltistan there was raiding for slaves and wives. I was informed a young man would fetch the price of a horse; an old man that of a donkey. I forget the equivalent of a young girl – but it was probably more.
The fast flowing Upper Indus along the Karakoram Highway in NWFP.

Views from stretches of the Highway are magnificent. At one place it passes, on the other side of the river, the magnificent bulk of Nanga Parbat the seventh highest mountain the world. At the road level there are vast areas of magnificent woodland stretching as far as the eye can see. It was not until we were about sixty kilometres north of the mountain that we could see its snow crowned summit towering above the lower foothills which had earlier blocked our view of it. I once camped up in the Fairy Meadows high in the foothills of Nanga Parbat.

The road itself is a prey to rock falls after the summer melt on the Himalayas and traversing it one encounters areas which have been washed away to the river below or where rocks rolling down from above have carried away great swathes. On one occasion, driving back from a holiday visit to Gilgit with an Irish friend from home, we had to traverse two such land slips. One was a very close thing where we were not more than three metres from the cliff overlooking the river!

The river rushes through a steep gorge coming from Kashmir. The gorge has been created by the meeting of the Indian and the Central Asian tectonic plates. Earthquakes and landslides are almost a daily occurrence. It is recorded that sometime about the eighteen sixties there had been a major landslide which dammed up the path of the river for several months backing it up to form a lake. Eventually, the river broke through and a huge wall of water swept down onto the plains below. A British regiment which had been encamped unsuspectingly in its path below and near Attock was said to have been annihilated.

The river below is fast running and grey in colour. Along the stream you will notice huge baulks of timber floating down from the areas of illegal logging higher upstream and which are collected lower down where the land flattens and the current has abated.
The Salt Mountains

From approximately the Salt Mountains, which lie about half way between the modern capital of Islamabad and the imperial city of Lahore, the land flattens. For more than a thousand kilometres until the Arabian Sea the land is flat and irrigated by numerous canal networks. I was told that for that total distance and in contrast with the Northern part, the land is nearly level with not more than one hundred and fifty metres difference. The meandering paths of the rivers across these wide flat plains have often been somewhat erratic. Apparently, the movement of the earth causes the rivers to veer over millennia with the result that the older cities and settlements are invariably established on the same side of the rivers flowing through the Punjab and require to catch up with it as it meanders almost wilfully away.

The Salt Mountains are a natural history specialist’s paradise. In one area I visited and which was formed from an ox-bow lake are to be found pre-historic remains of the antecedents of both the horse and the whale, when the latter moved across dry land on its limbs. The sites are excavated extensively during winter time by teams from several US universities. I was assured the Holy Grail will be to discover the earliest vestiges of hominoids. The universities working there during my visits were the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois who cooperated closely with the Pakistani Land Survey to ensure that artefacts uncovered are not stolen.
While I was there an official uncovered what must have been the fossils of six metre long mammoth tusks and carefully re-covered them with earth afterwards to protect them from robbers. I was presented with a piece of an herbivorous feeders’ ankle (sic) some eight million years’ old by one of the excavation team. It was apparently just one of so many thousands of such remains and considered to be of no intrinsic value. This contrasts with the Greco-Buddhist site at Taxila where the sale of grave goods, especially statues and coins is widespread and for the interested almost every antique shop in the Cosy Market in Islamabad can take out some priceless statues from under the table for sale to western tourists.\(^{34}\)

34 Happily, opportunist souvenir hunters are often taken in with very well fabricated “original copies”.

Taxila

The NWFP is a parched land, mountainous and dusty. In earlier times Alexander marched here and skirmished with the locals until after four years in the area he recruited many of them into his army and he marched south to Taxila, beside Islamabad, and then on to Multan where he received the wound that ultimately was to prove fatal. Here we find more surprises. Taxila with its enormous remains of early Buddhist society and still impressive stupas must have been a very eclectic and cultivated city. The remains cover some twenty five square kilometres and here more surprises. The king capitulated to Alexander and Taxila was ruled for some four or...
five hundred years by Greek speaking monarchs. The last dynasty, I think I recall was a Greek speaking Chinese tribe originating from Afghanistan!

The interesting museum on the site displays all the signs of high life including a seemingly functioning distillery. All this would be in contrast with the animated discussion over the latest silks imported from the East or gold and jewels from the Greek or Latin west.

What a marvellous eclectic and religiously permissive place to have visited at the height of its civilisation! It must have been an entrepot between the sub-continent and central Asia, just as Peshawar presently is. The caravanserai from the Silk Road leaves to traverse the High Himalayas to China to the East. Imagine the exotic and pigtailed Chinese pilgrims coming to study the Buddha’s teachings. The scents and pleasures of South Indian cooking and all rounded off by travellers’ tales of piracy and hostage taking in the High Hunzas.

Taxila is one of the best-kept secrets on the international tourist trail. Historically, it was an important springboard for Buddhism to move up the Silk Route to China. There you will see a Greek city laid out to a plan reminiscent of ancient Corinth. In this deeply Muslim area it is difficult to believe in historical times there was a fusion between the Greek and the Buddhist cultures. This is where the Buddha was first depicted dressed in a Greek toga. This too is where the Buddhist monks first began to build monasteries for protection. There will be another surprise. A Greek temple as seen from the front elevation reveals itself to have been a Zoroastrian fire temple from the rear. A Jainist temple rounds off a kaleidoscope of religious institutions.

Here too is where the wronged son of the great Indian King Ashoka was sentenced to have his eyes put out and where following his rehabilitation after blinding a huge ancient tradition of visual medicine was established. This tradition is still maintained by a Western funded eye hospital established in the area.
From the beginnings of the Mughal Empire the planning and building of imperial gardens was established as a major imperial pastime. These gardens and there are many across India and Pakistan were a major area of interest to the Moghul emperors. It says a lot about the refinement of these emperors when one of them Jahangir was renowned for his love of flowers. On his visits to Kashmir he is said to have collected flowers and this interest spread to a love of gardens being adopted across the empire. Jahangir’s son, Shah Johan, inspired and created the wonderful mausoleum and
garden of the Taj Mahal for his favourite wife Mumtaz Mahal, He is also responsible for the Red Fort at Delhi which contains the Mahtab Bagh, a night garden that was filled with night-blooming jasmine and other pale flowers. There were several imperial gardens built around the city of Lahore; there I often visited the Shalimar Gardens.

The Moghul Gardens at Wah lying off the Grand Trunk Road from Islamabad to Peshawar form a beautiful oasis. The palaces themselves are in ruins but there remains a beautiful, restful calm atmosphere.

It was a surprise and a great pleasure to leave the dusty highway, the Grand Trunk Road, and to turn into this place and to pass a quiet half an hour taking in the beauty and its historical associations. I visited it several times.

I was surprised to see a palm tree entwined around a broadleaf stem so closely that I couldn’t distinguish between one and the other. Perhaps this was just one botanical miracle wrought by a favourite gardener of one of the Moghul emperors.

A photo I took of one of the Moghul Emperor’s pleasure gardens off the Grand Trunk Road at Wah.

Just beside the Moghul Garden at Wah and on the Grand Trunk Road was a pilgrimage station visited by the Sikhs from over the border in India. There is a tradition very similar to the Giant’s Causeway in Antrim - but obviously much later - that a Sikh saint and his Muslim equivalent used to engage in throwing huge rocks at each other which explains the random boulders found in the vicinity.

Mohenjodaro - a part of the Lower Indus culture

On my visit to Mohenjodaro, I was accompanied by a brace of local officials and an armed escort. All of us enjoyed the diversion. I felt somewhat strange to have myself filmed by a video crew as I heaved and perspired up and down and over the site. On
the conclusion of my visit I was kindly presented with a copy of the video. It is ironic to think that I was the only tourist for that day – or indeed for many days.

Playing the video at home in Dublin brought the occasion back to me. The modern vista of the coursed and level brick walls make parts of the site appear familiar and recent. I found myself looking to see if the coursing was English or Flemish garden bond! However, the video was particularly poignant in so far as it recorded the military footsteps and clink of weaponry of my escort, who tried as far as possible to keep out of the film show.

Mohenjodaro: A passage through history.

Karachi and the Arabian Sea

For many of the times I visited Karachi there was always the prospect of civil strife. Sometimes it was just too dangerous to go out on the streets. I would arrange to meet my counterparts in one of the larger hotels where there was adequate security. I would be collected from the airport and driven directly to the hotel. The next day after the meeting I would be driven to the airport and leave as quickly and as unobtrusively as I could.

I have seen boats like those in the picture below on the Arabian Sea or earlier and further to the West during my time at Bandar Abbas in neighbouring Iran and just a couple of hundred kilometres up the coast, if that. The sea shore off Karachi is not so attractive. It’s called Clifton and the really wealthy thirteen or so families that are said to effectively rule Pakistan have homes there; they are all said to live in the vicinity.

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36 Since lost.
In Clifton, I often passed and had the family home of Benazir Bhutto pointed out to me. It was very well fortified and I recall the watch towers at each corner. I suppose it had to be.

In a way it was sad that there was so much tension. It was fanned by the various political parties who used the local antipathy between the native Sindhis and the MQM, who as previously noted had transferred from India at the time of partition. The Sindhis usually voted for Benazir’s PPP and treated the incoming migrants poorly, if not unwisely. As the MQM increased numerically the tensions rose. The military dictator, President Zia al Huk, then provided the MQM with arms to oppose the PPP, who were opposed to him. This provided a necessary counter balance. Earlier, Benazir’s father appointed Zia as his army Chief-of-staff when he was Prime Minister. That was his undoing. Zia ultimately with support from the fundamentalists overthrew Bhutto and eventually hanged him in Rawalpindi Jail. Zulfikkar Bhutto, like his daughter, was urbane and sophisticated – but no angel. He had by all accounts been involved in political assassinations. But there was a general consensus that he was sentenced on a trumped up charge.

My Pakistani friend Bashir Parvez always believed that the Bhuttos as a family were surrounded by Greek tragedy. Perhaps it was their hubris. Whatever it was they suffered on account of it. Zulfikkar Bhutto as noted was hanged by the army. Benazir herself was assassinated. Benazir’s husband, known amongst the diplomatic set as “Mister Twenty Five Per Cent” was arraigned before the court on corruption charges and spent many years in jail – indeed, he may well be still there. I can recall reading about their visit to Ireland when she was prime minister. In Ireland, he bought a million dollars’ worth of horses. He housed the horses, his polo ponies, in air conditioned stables. In Islamabad during walks in the Margalla Hills we often observed him from a distance playing polo with his friends or exercising his horses behind a military security screen. The contrast between the life style of his ponies –
not to speak of his own – and the labouring poor exposed to the summer heat was extreme.

Subsequently, Benazir’s brother Mirza, I think, became a political thorn in his side. He had returned from exile in Syria and announced he intended to set up his own political party and oppose Benazir in the forthcoming election. This action divided the family down the middle with Benazir’s mother favouring her son whom she asserted had every right to the premiership – even over her daughter. Mirza returning home late at night was assassinated by some policemen allegedly under the direction of Benazir’s husband. There followed real public passion and division between the family protagonists. Mother sided with daughter-in-law against Benazir. The daughter-in-law was elected to the seat her husband had sought and Benazir’s traditional family and clan followers were split apart. Thus began her downward spiral which culminated in her escaping into exile while her discredited husband languished for a number of years in Karachi Goal.

Further west, along the Arabian Sea there were some staggeringly beautiful areas. It’s a very isolated coast and my access to the area was by the old Fokker Friendship planes from Karachi. It was just too far to travel through the huge sand dunes by road. Alexander the Great in very poor health returned this way with his dispirited army. On this coast there are remains one of the earliest mosques on the subcontinent which was established by the invading Arab armies.

**Gwadar**

![Gwadar, isolated and beautiful projecting out into the Arabian Sea.](image)

One place that stands apart was the isolated port of Gwadar. There it sticks out into the sea like a hammerhead with high chalk cliffs. In the small town an investment had been made to set up a fish processing industry and we provided it with a training centre under the NVTP package. Strange to think that there is another of my designs
standing. I had to arrive and depart the same day as there was no guest house or hotel anywhere in the area – just small fishermen’s’ hovels. That is apart from the Chief Secretary’s Official Guest House and I didn’t manage to find the key to that! More recently it has been extensively developed by the government in partnership with the Chinese.

Then it was so deserted and so heavenly. I marvelled at the blending of tradition and the beauty of the Arab fishing dhows drawn up on the strand with azure blue sea and sky and picked out against the chalk cliffs. Alongside the dhows the crews would lay out their harvest of silver fish to dry shimmering in the intense sunshine. This could be seen all along the shoreline. I found it warm in winter. In summer temperatures it must be unbearable with no shelter in which to hide and with the sun reflected off both sea and sand.

Being deserted and facing across to Arabia, it was a smugglers’ entrepot for goods from the Emirates and Saudi. On the return journey the Friendships used to be packed tight with huge packages containing TV sets and refrigerators and whatever else. The men carrying them seemed to appear at the small airstrip out of nowhere. I suppose the customs officials in Karachi found it worth their while to look the other way every now and then.

Gwadar is located not far from the border with Iran. I was amazed to be told that ladies of the night regularly plied their trade from over the border. The border, as nearly all borders are, appeared to be quite porous. Smuggled Iranian petrol sold in Gwadar at the same price per litre as bottled water!

My life in-country

Islamabad was my home base during most of my time in Pakistan. Expatriates say “it’s only five minutes from Pakistan”, which I think has some truth in it. It reminds me of several other capitals of newly emerging nations. There’s not much of a classical elegance about it. It doesn’t compare with Delhi but, having said that, it has many advantages. In spring it is at its most beautiful when all the jacaranda trees are in bloom with their blue blossoms everywhere. It’s clean and easy to live in and is laid out on the grand scale.

I had an apartment there for three years. Then while in Quetta in July 1996, I was telephoned by the EC in Brussels and asked to stay on as the EC representative on the Social Action Project preparatory teams. Subsequently, I participated on eight such preparatory missions which were completed in July 1998. My last visit was in about 2005, when I was there with three colleagues on a programming mission.

There are several Supermarkets, which in fact are shopping blocks with many interesting places to stroll and view an interesting range of merchandise – from books (there are many bookshops), Persian carpets, which are everywhere and carvings, old

37 The Social Action Project was an enormous undertaking by the government and donors (EC, the World Bank, the British and Dutch overseas development agencies to bring overdue reform to the social sectors (health, education, rural water supply and sanitation and reproductive health)). The estimated budget was US$ 0-65 billion.
camera shops etc. The grand scale of the streets means it’s almost obligatory to have a car - unless you are a long distance runner. However, it’s not congested and is famous amongst Pakistanis for its invigorating climate.

It’s situated – as they say - within easy tank ride of the Indian border. Kashmir, which continued to be on the boil, is to the North East and only about 60 km away. The K2 Mountain is 100 km as the bird flies; Nanga Parbat is less. Peshawar and the Khyber Pass start about 100 km to the North West. The Margalla Hills, the first foothills of the Himalayas commence less than a km to the North. They are only hills - no more than 4,000 feet but they constitute for me its most beautiful feature and they start literally a five minute drive from the city centre. I had my own walks there which I would take immediately after coming from work. There is one copse of trees which I used to visit regularly for the peace and beauty I always found in its shade.

I had intended, when the time came, to drive my jeep back to Europe. “I am looking for offers from passengers. Think of it - wherever there's hot blood we will be passing through! There will be Tartars, Genghis Khan, Tamburlaine, to the left and the right of us. Unfortunately, it will only have four seats. No revolvers - they make cheap Kalashnikovs here. And you have to be able to get on with the driver. Applications accepted”.
“I have moved into the apartment which has three bedrooms and two toilets / showers and a large dining room. With two bathrooms and three bedrooms and Moghul style I can play host to the multitudes!! I have forgotten how to use the washing machine. Instead, I give instructions to the cleaning man (he's about the size of the boys although somewhat older and I'm very tempted to put my arms around him and give him a hug as I do with the boys, I had better not)!! The gardener grows Marijuana and opium in the flower patches!!”

“It’s the bottom half of a house and comes with external colonnade and cloisters. Outside there is a garden and a colonnade. The garden is well laid out with a view from the garden of the Margalla Hills. It should be very pleasant in the cooler weather. It’s in walking distance of the Jinna Supermarket with books and restaurants and Afghan carpet shops. When you live behind mosquito blinds and try to keep out the heat the light is always a bit dull, so to brighten it up, I have bought some colourful wall hangings and bed covers etc.”

“I have invested in a rocking chair for my old age. It’s very smart with inlaid brass. It will probably best fit into the kitchen. It doesn't rock and roll on carpet. You see I am going downhill fast!!”

The Margalla Gap lies to the north of Islamabad. It forms a natural cut through the mountains. It was situated on the conquerors route coming south to the sub-continent and was an extremely strategic point in earlier times. The Margalla hills themselves in ancient times delineated the border between the sub-continent and central Asia to the north. Far away and due East, to the far, far side of Kashmir, Pakistani and Indian, we are level with the Plateau of Tibet. This is high mountainy country!!”
As a rule you cannot ever drink tap water here. You always have to be suspicious of the source of any drinking water. Everyone uses bottled mineral water or boils water before use. You peel all fruit and leave salads, especially lettuce, severely alone. That being said it’s no great deal.”

“Yesterday, Friday, I went hiking up the mountains for six hours with my mountain boots. I was thrilled and very glad I brought them. I have become very friendly with Irish and Swedish Colonels in the UN Afghanistan Observers Corps who organise the treks and the après ski. It was a super occasion. The temperature is down now to the high 20s centigrade.”

The Asian Study Group was a real source of interest and covered many different topics. During my first mission 92/93 both my ILO colleagues were heavily, if not
fanatically, interested in bird watching. One of them, Geoff Ward, under the aegis of the Asian Study Group, wrote a small publication on the various species to be observed in the environs of Rawal Lake and the Margalla Hills.

I enrolled with several congenial participants into the fellowship of bird watchers. I learned to enjoy bird watching hugely and always carried a binoculars and the locally published definitive bird book on my travels. I note from Geoff Ward’s book, which I am leafing through, that there was an immense variety of bird life available. Garden visitors to the houses in Islamabad included bulbuls, rose-ringed parakeets, sunbirds, flycatchers, shrikes, mynas, woodpeckers, tree pies, babblers, tits, finches, magpie robins, cuckoos, drongos, coppersmiths, golden orioles, minivet, hoopoes and bar-tailed tree creepers. Rawal Lake and its surroundings immediately outside Islamabad provided an important range of habitats for resident and non-resident species such as kingfishers (I often saw three different species in one visit – the white-breasted kingfisher, the pied kingfisher and the common kingfisher – although the latter appellation for this beautiful bird has to be a misnomer), grebe, cormorants, herons, egrets, bitterns, spoonbill, duck, harriers, osprey, kites, rail, coots, jacana, plovers, sandpipers, snipe, terns, gulls, flycatchers and cuckoos. In addition, at the east end of the lake in an area of open fields and scrub frequent visitors include larks, pipits, bunting, finches, munias, wryneck and wagtails. It certainly was an ideal place to start an interest.

Subsequently, in India on short trips to the national parks and especially to Barrackpur, with the family I continued this hobby. Barrackpur was a wonderful experience where we were cycled on the back pannier about the nature reserve while our pedal man explained the habitat and characteristics of the various species observed.

As I write I remember the passionate dedication of my ‘twitcher’ colleagues. Coffee time was a stilted and over formal ritual. It needn’t have been but my British senior

38 “Islamabad Birds” by Geoff Ward, the Asian Study Group, 1994.
colleague wished to have it so. It always began with an update of the most recent birds observed. This was a sort of clearing of the air as well as a bonding ritual between both my colleagues. I was suffered to contribute on certain occasions.

However, wheels can turn. On one occasion the three of us visited a site, I think it was Karak, which was situated beside the Afghan border. They left me to carry on with my business and without advising anyone they disappeared to go bird watching. When the business was over I asked the contractor whether he had seen my colleagues. He was horrified that they had gone off wandering on their own. UN personnel command high ransoms and a disappearance or kidnapping on his site could have significant political repercussions for him with the provincial administration. He immediately armed his workmen and sent them off searching. Some hour or so later they returned with two very annoyed ILO colleagues who refused to concede they had been at risk! They were very upset with me because of course they didn’t need to have come and they belatedly realised that the contractor would report the incident to the provincial governor. This was one of the few instances where I felt totally innocent and expressed my justified concern that they had brought us close to being involved in a kidnapping incident. However, it gives some indication of the lengths as “twitchers” they were prepared to go to catch a view – perhaps of a red vented bulbul.

Incidentally, in Islamabad I came across a huge settlement of steppe eagles. I have included above a quick photograph of one in flight over the Margallas, which although taken into the sun, came out in one fashion or another. Throughout the winter numbers - rising to the hundreds - migrated over the Himalayas and Hindu Kush from Central Asia and with no sense of dignity encamped themselves on the urban dump site outside the city. These majestic birds were clearly visible from the road connecting Islamabad to the Grand Trunk Road, a particularly dangerous thoroughfare.
Continuous inter-marriage amongst the upper classes doesn’t guarantee healthy children as another letter I wrote home illustrates. “I would appreciate a favour. The eight year old son of my counterpart here (the man who is married to his first cousin - the Moghul princess) had what appeared to be an attack of epilepsy. She has been advised that he will grow out of it. However, as a mother she is still very concerned. Can you send me literature on "Rondelac Epilepsy of Childhood", either what it is or the addresses of organisations of parents at home or in the UK? They have been kind to me and are anxious to meet you. They are certainly different.”

I quote further from letters or emails written while I was in Pakistan. “Yesterday, we passed two funerals in the villages, the bodies borne by the men, no women present. Later on, we saw vultures dining off a dead horse - not a beautiful sight.”

“I'm back again here in my hotel after finishing as much of the work as I can. I may be treated as the "Englishman sahib" (every European is so called – but I can imagine the old man turning in his grave!!) but I have been less than civil to several contractors. My friends in the consultancy drive me bananas with the number of interruptions. Today, I was working on a confidential document which will be the basis for paying inflation to all contractors. They all already have their claims presented. Anyway, four of the contractors just barged in. They laughed when they saw what I was at and after pleasantries removed themselves. So much for confidentiality!! I could only laugh too and swear at my friends the consultants and their protestations that it wouldn't happen again.”

“This afternoon I took off early, refusing yet another sweet tea, I left my driver go. As I think of it - it's amazing how used to having the door opened I'm becoming. At first my reaction was almost “do you think I'm a goddamn cripple" - now I give a simpering smile, like those nice old ladies and straighten myself out with some decorum. Only the muslin is missing.”

“I smiled last night to think of the way these proper young Moslems were carrying my suitcase which was laden with 6 beer bottles. My friends are not allowed it, but the lowly Christian road sweepers are. Thus was I supplied with contraband bought
from Christians. On my side I brought provisions labelled "Black Label" from the UN Commissariat and I am voted a "great sport" by the insider set."

―Sahib! Come and sit and have a glass of tea while I display my beautiful carpets‖. Afghan carpet shop, Supermarket, Islamabad.

―Incidentally, speaking of Christians, there was a demonstration by them against having their religion entered on their identity cards. The Government here seems to capitulate to the mullahs whenever they are under threat. There is a vile ordinance against blaspheming the prophet, which is often inveighed against the Christian minority. It carries the death penalty and the government, although under pressure from the embassies and donors to get rid of it, are either unable to take on the mullahs or unwilling. Since my time in Pakistan, one Roman Catholic bishop has committed suicide to draw the attention of the world to this injustice. I wonder has anything been done about it?‖

―There's a terrific book shop here in Lahore. This time I've read in the last few days "The Great Mutiny" and I'm into "The Rise and fall of the Great Powers". I have visited many of the locations of drama during the Mutiny in the Punjab and the North West Frontier Province where action took place. On the other hand I wonder whether this pleasant people I live amongst could revert and do me in as a despised "Firingis"? I suppose when people stare at you as they do so often in the street there is some possibility - but not much.‖

During my time I was introduced by my much liked and esteemed World Bank colleague Bashir Parvez, to a circle of eminent elderly men. One was a retired High Court judge, there was Bashir, who was no chicken but someone I admired
enormously, a professor from the local university and last, but certainly not least, a
gold seller. The gold seller, who on one occasion presented me with a present for my
wife, had rented a stable and living accommodation directly opposite his family home
in the old part of Lahore. This was our illegal drinking emporium. His wife refused
to have him in the house with us. So, we four would meet regularly, say once a
month, and would be waited on by his elderly man servant with great dignity.

Tongas and the later less elegant put-puts throng the old market areas of Lahore
(Courtesy of Microsoft Atlas).

It was my responsibility to bring a good bottle of whiskey. Anything less than
Bushmills twelve year old or straight malt Scotch, was not appreciated. In fact, as
they were not familiar with Irish, they were highly critical until they got used to it.
Undisturbed in this bachelor quarter we eat our oranges peeled by the manservant.
Then we drank beer and then whiskey. As we did we watched videos of Indian
dancers and discussed life in general. I learned so much about the pre-partition
culture, about the politics and humour. After about three hours, we would dust
ourselves down and depart – all looking very pukka. Some would come back with
me. Usually though their sons would arrive to pick up these grand old men. At least
one, the judge, has died since. I marvelled that he could so appreciate the English
common law system and quote from it so familiarly – although he had never been out
of India!

Recently I went to a choir recital in the local Monkstown Parish Church. I find
Monkstown Church very interesting, especially the plaques put up to earlier
nineteenth century parishioners. There’s one I remember to commemorate the
McDonnell brothers; I think that’s the way the name is spelt. Their father had been a
clergyman and a senior academic in Trinity College during the 1860s. They as, I
suppose many others of the Unionist persuasion at the time left to make careers in the
British Army in India. Sadly, both met their deaths in the subcontinent in the military
campaigns related to the Indian Mutiny. It must have been a great tragedy to their
parents that both should meet their deaths in pursuing their military ideals very far
from home. What made it especially pertinent to me as I listened to the choir singing
Handel’s oratorios was how I could speculate on the towns and cities across India and Pakistan recorded on the plaque. I had been or was quite familiar with many of these faraway places.

Another feature of the Monkstown Church is that it was built by a contractor of the name of Semple. Curiously, during my period as a quantity surveyor I came to know a Semple, a direct relation of this 19th century church building contractor. His son went out to Pakistan and worked for Oxfam and other agencies - including the UN. Recently, I heard on the radio that he had become involved in trying to solve the Afghanistan imbroglio. While under appointment by the EC he had attempted to broaden the peace discussions through reaching out to more moderate Taliban. This annoyed, the Afghan President and he insisted on having him and several colleagues expelled from the country. The son is married to a Pakistani lady, and I had met him once or twice, especially around the same Patrick's Day celebrations. He appeared over six feet and bearded and dressed in an Irish kilt. One day he took me home, and he showed me the first picture of himself in a boat. I was surprised and delighted. His picture had been taken with his father on a fishing trip in my small boat off Dun Laoghaire!

In 1996 I was coming to the end of my sojourn in Pakistan. I was completing a final part of a World Bank project and looking forward to returning home. Or so I thought until in my hotel room in Quetta I received a telephone call from the EC Headquarters in Brussels enquiring whether I would stay on and be team leader for the proposed EC component of a joint EC/World Bank/Asian Development Bank sector wide approach for education reform. Consultants never have the luxury – or rarely have – to turn down a contract which would provide continuity. Sector wide approaches - or SWAps to the initiated - were new to me. I was mildly excited to have been chosen. I stayed on for about six weeks working closely with an Australian team leader and the multi-cultural teams of experts from both Banks. When the mission was over I returned home and wrote my report.
Outside Islamabad: the late evening bus home.

It is difficult if not impossible to forget Pakistan. Any reference to it immediately draws me. Pakistan was and continues to be a major form of reference to any development work I engage in. I wish continuing health and happiness to my many friends there.