

TALES OF PAKISTAN, 1981

WHY A TRIP TO PAKISTAN?

As I write this in 2018, Pakistan seems a risky place for a vacation for a westerner, even in the cities, and above all in the tribal areas along the border of Afghanistan. It was a different matter in 1981. In October that year, I spent three weeks in Pakistan as the guest of Khwaja Azam Ali, a man who had been my office mate for a few years while we were fellow post-graduate students at the University of Tasmania. I had been closely involved with the preparation of Ali's thesis. Before returning to his university job in Islamabad, he told me that I would be welcome to visit. Towards the end of 1981, I needed to use some accumulated vacation from my first job, before I expected to leave for a university position in the USA. I thought about New Zealand, but settled on Pakistan – when would I have another chance? If I'd selected a destination for its tourist potential, I would most likely have opted for India instead of Pakistan, but I had an invitation, and a friend to visit. Many of my subsequent travel plans have been made for similar reasons. So I bought myself an airline ticket to Lahore via Singapore and Karachi.

In those days I liked to prepare for travel by learning some of the local language. While we had been students in Tasmania, Ali had taught me a little Urdu. I had actually heard of the language in a strange context years before. In high school days, I was listening to the television news in Tasmania. My attention was drawn to a news story about people speaking in tongues in a church in Melbourne, and about one woman in particular who was thought to have been speaking Urdu, a language she would never have encountered – not a very likely proposition. Little did I know that attempting to stammer out some Urdu would be in my future. Ali concentrated on teaching me to tell the time, so I learned the numbers and how to say “minutes to”, “minutes past” and so on. Then, when some of his Pakistani friends were conversing with him in our shared office, he would suddenly interrupt and say “*Chris, kya baja he?*” I would answer after consulting my watch, and we would both enjoy the spectacle of jaws dropping. I had several months' warning of my visit to Pakistan, so I asked Ali to send me a book of Urdu lessons for an English speaker. The project turned out not to be as easy as I had hoped, not least because Roman letters are utterly inadequate at representing the variety of consonants in Indian languages. Urdu is written in Arabic script in Pakistan. In any case, I gave it a try, and arrived in Pakistan with some Urdu vocabulary and grammar. English and Urdu are both used widely throughout the country.

At 3 a.m. one early October morning, the overnight flight from Singapore deposited me on the ground – literally, because the airport had no lounges with extending walkways -- in the coastal city of Karachi. The whole journey from Australia had seemed like going very far out on a limb, into most unfamiliar territory. Such impressions intensified as I felt the hot, dry, dusty desert wind blowing across the airfield. By the time I reached Lahore, where I was to meet Ali, I had spent the small hours of the morning crouched in a defensible corner of the Karachi airport terminal, followed by a two-hour flight in a Pakistan International Airways passenger jet crammed to the gunwales with migrant workers returning

from the Persian Gulf States, gift-laden, to visit their families. On the tarmac in Lahore, I anxiously scanned the large crowd awaiting the flight. It was a huge relief to see Ali's familiar face.

HIGH PAKISTANI SOCIETY IN LAHORE

Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* opens in 19th-Century Lahore, with the boy Kim sitting on a large cannon displayed outside the Wonder House of Lahore. *Wonder House* is the literal translation of museum in Urdu. The cannon was still outside the museum in 1981, and I imagine that it still sits there now. It was a fitting sight to see on my first day in Lahore. Of course Ali took me to visit the museum itself. The building was full of cultural wonders, of which, sadly, I remember just one truly remarkable piece. It was a bronze Buddha, taken from Taxila, an archaeological site west of Rawalpindi, and was the great treasure of the museum. Most representations of the Sakmuni Buddha are stylized in body, and tend to plumpness. This figure was seated in lotus pose and had starved during prolonged fasting and meditation. The sculptor had depicted emaciated limbs and torso with large veins and arteries bulging through the skin.

Lahore was one of the great urban centers of the Mughal emperors. The city had been their capital in the latter half of the 16th Century, and later, when they moved the capital eastward to Delhi and Agra, served as a resting station on the journey to the imperial summer quarters in the Valley of Kashmir. Lahore was embellished with grand monumental buildings dating from its time as capital. These included the Badshahi Mosque, the Lahore Fort, and the Shalimar Gardens. The only day when we could have seen the mosque was a Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, when tourist visits would have been inappropriate. So we visited the fort during daylight, and the gardens at night, contenting ourselves with the magnificent silhouette of the mosque as viewed from the fort.

The Lahore fort is not simply a military facility, but also includes luxurious buildings, palace quarters for royalty. The best of the buildings are pavilions decorated in abstract Islamic style, with stone screens of great sculptural virtuosity. A geometric pattern would be repeated perfectly, carved from a slab that must have been just an inch or two thick, and many feet square. The most lavish pavilion is the *shish mahal*, which means mirror palace. The interior surfaces are inlaid with hundreds of pieces of curved mirror. At night, dancing girls holding flaming torches would perform on the open side of the pavilion for the emperor and his male colleagues, who would see myriad small reflections of the flames on every inlaid surface.

The fort visit was also memorable because Ali had dressed me as a Pakistani, in *shalwar kamis*. The *shalwar* is the lower garment, a set of baggy pants tight at the ankles, with legs ballooning upwards towards a waist that is many times more ample than required by a man's midriff. They come with a drawstring, along which the ample waistline material can be bunched so as to expose clean cloth (thereby hiding the dirty parts) during several days' wear. The *kamis* (a word related to *la chemise* or *o camiso*, probably by way of Portuguese Goa) is the upper garment, slipped over the head and shoulders, buttoned just below the neck, and provided with long flaps before and behind. These permit a man to squat and relieve himself in a public place without revealing too much. Ali thought that I might, disguised in a *shalwar kamis*, just pass as a Pakistani. He said I might perhaps resemble a red-headed Pashtun tribesman descended from one of Alexander's fair-skinned Macedonian soldiers, if I kept my mouth shut. I doubt that too many of the people we encountered were fooled.

The Shalimar, or beautiful, Gardens were another imperial pleasure site. The court would relax in a pavilion at one end of a long pool built of white marble. Along the sides of the pool, marble platforms had been constructed just below water level; on these performed the dancing girls, no doubt dressed colorfully by daylight, and holding lamps or torches after dark. We went at night, when the water-works were lit with colored electric lights. The outing to the Shalimar Gardens was what Ali decided upon in preference to going to the part of the city with establishments at which one could see the contemporaneous generation of dancing girls. Ali told me that we could consider such an outing, but that it would be bad for our reputations, should we be observed by anyone who knew us.

Ali was well-connected in Lahore. He was the youngest of a family of nine children, whose father had fled Uttar Pradesh (the part of India around Delhi) in the murderous post-independence upheavals of 1947, and had eventually risen high in the Pakistani Civil Service. Ali's father therefore eventually lived in the new capital, Islamabad. Ali had been designated as the son who would remain in his parents' household, eventually caring for them in old age. Ali's siblings had for the most part established themselves in professions, brothers and sisters alike. The sister who had become a lawyer in Lahore had a fine house in an upscale suburb, and had invited us to stay there. Another sister was a physician. An influential brother, whose profession I cannot remember now, was a leading light in the Pakistani Cricket Board. He was therefore able to entertain us at the Lahore Cricket Club on my first evening in the city. He told me he could arrange for me to have a beer at the Club – no trifling matter in a country declared dry by its Islamist dictator Mohammed Zia ul Haq. I declined, gratefully and politely; I felt no need to drink a beer in front of a dozen others who were unable to do so. This was a powerful family, and in retrospect I, as the son of an Australian small farmer, was a very long way out of my league.

It was a happy time to be an Australian in Pakistan because of cricket. The Australian test cricket team was the only one capable of offering the Pakistani team a serious challenge in those days, and the rivalry was amicable. Melbourne and Lahore were the two cities capable of filling a stadium seating 100,000 for a cricket match. The whole country was obsessed with cricket. On weekend mornings, every slum alley in downscale parts of Lahore seemed to have an improvised cricket match among the local boys. If I introduced myself to almost anyone as Australian, the topic of cricket would be raised immediately. All I had to do to fit right in was pretend to be a bit more interested in cricket than I actually was!

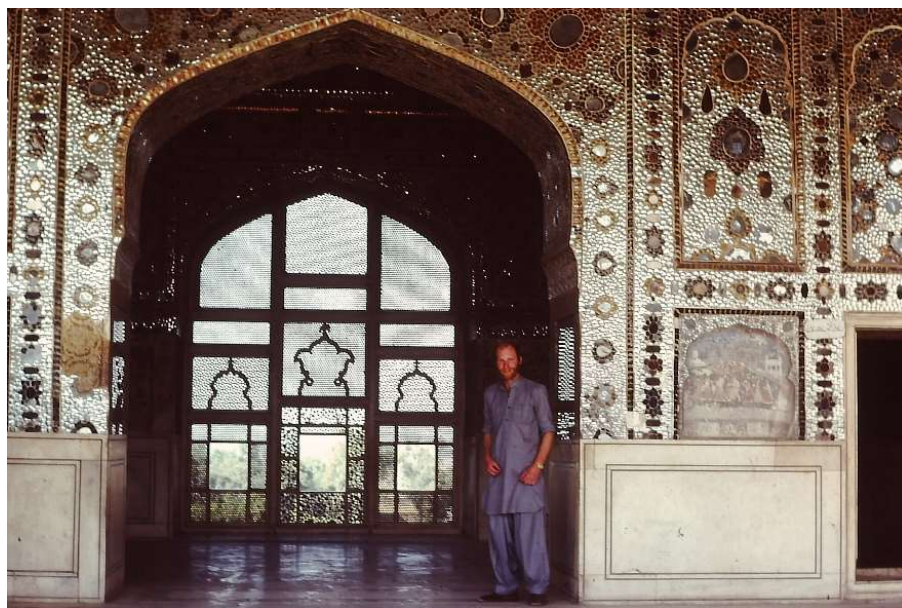
Having experienced affluent Lahore, it remained for me to observe how the rest of the city lived. Ali didn't try to shield me from that. As we drove through inner areas of the city, beggars awaited us at the stop lights. I had never been confronted by deformed and disabled people in such a way, and I don't remember ever being presented with such distressing disability since, not even in India. One of our drives took us through a cross-section of living conditions, so that we could do some errand for Javed. In the slum areas, housing was in chaotic tenements three and four stories high, crammed along the narrow alleys with the Friday morning cricket games. Women walked the streets fully shrouded in burkahs; what looked like a black sack of potatoes resting side-saddle behind the driver of a motor scooter was his wife. These people were not the most unfortunate by a long stretch, however; we drove past a stinking open sewer wide enough to provide space for ramshackle shelters perched on wooden platforms straddling the channel.

So I was shown the best and the worst Pakistani society could offer in my first days in the country.



Marble screens at the
Lahore Fort

The fasting Buddha in the
Lahore Museum.



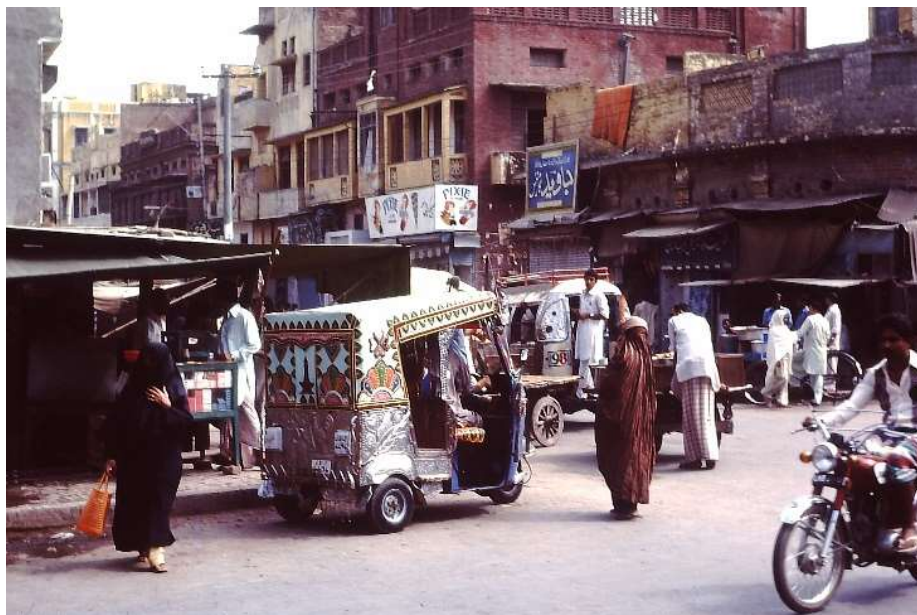
CJE at the Shish
Mahal, Lahore Fort.



Shalimar Gardens, lit up at night.



Silhouette of the
Badshahi Mosque.



Street scenes in central
Lahore





CJE and Javed with
the cannon at
Lahore Museum



Lahore tyre
repair shop

THE GRAND TRUNK ROAD

The Grand Trunk Road is an ancient route that stretches across North India between Chittagong, in Bangla Desh on the Bay of Bengal, and Kabul in Afghanistan. It is no longer easy for a casual traveler to pass along the entire length; the borders between India, Pakistan and Afghanistan pose serious obstacles. During my visit to Pakistan in 1981, however, I was able to travel most of the Pakistani segment. In those days, it was the main road from Lahore to the capital city Islamabad, where Ali lived

and worked. Recent maps show a modern freeway that has circumvented the old road to the south and west.

Part 1. Lahore to Islamabad.

Let's begin in Lahore. Ali and his relative Javed had brought the family car from Islamabad, so we were able to see the city. From Lahore, the road stretches south towards the city of Ferozepur in India. Within the city, it is a major arterial road, six lanes broad, and it bears the name Ferozepur Road. I don't recall seeing actual lane markings, and I'm not sure they would have been very useful. Ali took me for a drive along Ferozepur Road towards evening on my first day in Lahore. Ali must have been well aware of what my reaction – as a Tasmanian accustomed to small-town traffic and a more conservative approach to city driving – would be. The rush-hour traffic was indeed a wondrous sight! We were moving with the predominant stream, which had expanded amorphously to occupy a breadth equivalent to about four lanes, but without any of the tiresome discipline of driving between lines. It was a chaotic, cacophonous mass of just about any kind of conveyance known to humankind (or so I thought, until I spent time in Karachi later in the trip). Bikes and motor scooters, motor rickshaws, cars, trucks small and large, buses and a sprinkling of various animal-drawn conveyances all wove around, occupying whatever spaces appeared whenever a chance arose. Ali demonstrated the correct driving technique: one hand on the steering-wheel, and the other on the horn. His horn hand was just about as busy as his steering hand. I might well have decided that my life was about to end! Under the circumstances, there was little to do but surrender to the will of Allah (a widely acknowledged element of Pakistani driving) and enjoy the experience. As darkness fell, and I became accustomed to the hurly-burly on the road, a new spectacle emerged. All of the buildings lining the street included ground-floor shops and workshops open to the street and lit by dim electric bulbs. Turbaned men worked on bike and car repairs; carpentry and electrical work, any trade you can think of that can be crammed into a small room. The small-scale commerce of the city was on display.

We were due to drive to Islamabad on the Saturday following my arrival. Javed had an errand on the far side of Lahore – the far and considerably less affluent side relative to the comfortable quarter where Ali's sister lived. That's where the auto-electrical problems that were to make high adventure of the day's journey began. Ali and I found ourselves sitting on a sidewalk coated with dry animal dung, not far from an open sewer, while Javed sought help at one of the numerous street-side workshops. We were soon on our way once more.

The northwestern boundary of Lahore is the Ravi River, one of the five great rivers that water the Punjab. Punjab (which is correctly pronounced "pun", not "poon" –jab) means five rivers. During the day's drive, we would cross two more of the rivers, the Chenab and the Jhelum, which flow across the alluvial plain of the Punjab. The flat alluvial terrane is crammed with farms, and is home to tens of millions of people. It's the breadbasket of Pakistan, dependent on runoff from the Himalayas, and is an anomaly in what is otherwise a very dry country. Beyond the Jhelum River, the road ascends to the arid and rugged Potwar Plateau.

As a result of our car problems in Lahore, we had only reached Gujranwala by lunch time. Gujranwala is a flat, dirty, smelly city in the middle of the Punjab plain. We ate in a small restaurant that we reached by walking along a street with an open black-water drain. The Punjabis who live on the plain must do without sewers, because those simply don't work during the summer monsoon season. Sparse as the monsoon is in the Punjab relative to the rest of India, it nonetheless brings the water table to the

surface during the summer. Buried pipes would cease conveying waste. The meal tasted good – Ali had me compliment the cook in my rudimentary Urdu by saying *bahut achcha tha* (it was very good) – but if I were to instinctively pick the occasion on which I contracted the Giardia and Shigella that eventually made me sick, that meal would be the one.

Back on the road again, we reached Jhelum before dusk. We had proceeded some miles past the city of Jhelum, and quite far up the escarpment of the Potwar Plateau, in a place where two or three hamlets could be seen at some distance from the road, when the electrical problem stopped the car once more. Javed sprang into action again, hitch-hiking to the nearest place where there might be help, while Ali was considering the options for spending a night as safely as possible in one of the hamlets, should that prove necessary. Javed returned fairly soon, however, with a vehicle that would tow our car to a place where it could be repaired.

That place turned out to be the Pakistani equivalent of a truck-stop. Most of the trucks on Pakistani highways in those days were the kind with the tray attached to the cab, not semi-trailers. The tray would have a tall wooden casing painted pale blue with brightly-colored images, the sides rising to about 12 feet above ground level. Popular images included the name of the Holy Prophet and Al-Buraq, the steed that took Muhammad on the hijra, his night flight to Jerusalem. Al Buraq was depicted with a winged horse-like body and a woman's head. Al Buraq seems to have symbolized the driver's prowess in speedy delivery, and the name of the Holy Prophet served as insurance against the risks that would inevitably be taken in the process – and risks were indeed routinely taken. Now picture a clear open area in the semi-desert scrub of the Potwar Plateau, with dozens of those trucks arranged around a circle, front ends in, the painted tray-casings looming behind the cabs in the failing light. In the center was a fire pit, and the drivers sat, relaxing, on metal-frame benches around it. Ali and I were invited to sit with them. It wasn't obvious to me that the place was likely to be a den of thieves until I decided to get my camera out to check how much film was left. Ali was annoyed with me for showing my camera in front of the drivers. An hour or two later, we were back on the road.

That repair took us as far as the dual carriageway about 20 kilometres from Islamabad. Javed again left in search of help; this time he hitchhiked into Islamabad to get another family vehicle that would be able to tow ours. Ali was very uneasy about our vulnerability beside a highway at night. Few cars were coming past. He had me hide my passport and watch under the cover of the back seat. His fears culminated when a police car passed us on the opposite side. The car slowed down as the driver looked us over, and then it drove away. I had been standing outside the car. Ali proceeded to tell me that he thought the policeman would have robbed us if he hadn't seen a foreigner with the car.

Needless to say, it was a great relief to arrive in Islamabad at Ali's father's house later that night.



Crossing the Jhelum River on the Grand Trunk Road, between Lahore and Rawalpindi



Where the car broke down, on the ascent of the Potwar Plateau, northwest of Jhelum

Part 2. Islamabad to Peshawar.

After I'd been in Islamabad about a week, Ali decided we should visit a friend of his in Peshawar. The friend, an engineer, had a car, so we didn't need to risk another long trip in the family vehicle. Instead, we took a passenger wagon. The drive took at least three hours, passing first across the flat agricultural plain west of Rawalpindi, then through some arid country around the Indus River, where we stopped for a break. There were two women sitting in the seats in front of us. Ali warned me to keep my hands well away from the back of the seats, in case the women should take offense at close approach by a male. Not being used to such a limitation, I had to keep reminding myself. The women turned out to be not so conservative. When we stopped beside the Indus River, one of them turned to me and asked where I was from, while Ali was out of earshot. From my point of view, courtesy demanded that I speak back to them. Ali seemed shocked when he returned, and wanted to be certain that woman had initiated the conversation. At about this stage I noticed the reaction of another passenger, a man in Pakistani garb

including a cylindrical white hat. The man, who seemed to be seething with anger, was glaring in my direction. I wasn't sure whether his disapproval was directed at the interaction with the women, or more generally at my presence as a non-believer. I've met angry Muslims like him in other places since that time, but very rarely.

Another memory of that part of the road, which is long, straight and none too wide in places, and passes by military camps termed cantonments, was the traffic. By the end of the journey, darkness had fallen, and the driver entertained us with an exhibition of night-time driving technique. We had numerous encounters with the decorated trucks driving and passing wildly, and with unlit animal-drawn carts – all good reasons not to drive after dark, Ali said. We didn't have a choice that time.

Part 3: The Khyber Pass.

Ali's engineer friend had a pleasant house with a small walled yard in a fairly densely populated part of Peshawar. He commented that his neighbor to one side was continually complaining that he (Ali's friend) and others were looking over the walls at the neighbor's wife – but that she wasn't much to look at. The engineer, whose name I no longer remember, was working on the construction of a mosque in the suburbs. He took us to see it. The mosque was a beautiful, open, airy structure, surmounted by the usual onion dome, and painted highly reflective white and off-white.

We had a full day for a trip, and the engineer was kind enough to take us along the next stretch of the Grand Trunk Road in his car. Just outside Peshawar, the road stretched straight and flat across a barren desert plain. Not far from the city, it passed through a large stone gate, the boundary of the Punjab province, I was informed. Beyond lay the Northwest Frontier territories, whose attachment to Pakistan is somewhat looser than that of the other provinces. This situation was underlined by the requirement that we sign out before proceeding – so that someone official would know that we had gone into the lawless marches of the country. The road led across the plain towards the Hindu Kush Mountains, and into the fabled Khyber Pass. The road winds up a narrowing mountain canyon towards a relatively low pass into Afghanistan. Alexander's army moved southeast along the route in the 300s BC, leaving few permanent traces except for red hair and blue eyes that crop up from time to time, to the present day, among the Pashtun population. The British army went on campaign in the opposite direction in the 19th century, in a vain attempt to exert some control over affairs in Afghanistan. Resistance must have been fierce in the pass. They left military memorials that can still be seen, maintained with brightly colored paint, in a roadside cutting. The pass is bare of vegetation and apparently devoid of agricultural livelihood, but is nonetheless home to numerous people whose living derives ultimately from smuggling. The atmosphere is, consequently, tense. The highway passes through the town of Landi Kotal, a place where a man would feel half-naked in the open without a rifle slung across his shoulder, and where outsiders don't stop casually to see the sights. Further up the pass, the road passes within view of walled compounds with watchtowers. I desperately wanted to take a photo of one of those. After some discussion, Ali and his friend stopped the car but told me that I should stand on the running board, take my picture looking over the top of the car, and get back in immediately. I took my picture and lived to tell the tale.

At the top of the pass, we parked the car and stood, sticking our toes into Afghanistan, and admiring the view of range after range of purple mountains. The road wound westward down a valley on its way to

Jalalabad, out of bounds to anyone without a good reason to enter a country in which the Russians were learning the pitfalls of war in such terrain. Security was not guaranteed on the Pakistani side of the line, so we learned from a veteran Pakistani soldier clad in a dingy uniform. He came with his rifle and kept watch while we viewed, and his warning discouraged us from staying long.



The mosque that
Ali's engineer friend
was building in
Peshawar



The Khyber Pass
in Pakistan.



The Khyber Pass in Pakistan. The fortified village in the lower photo is the one I photographed from the running board of the car.



The Khyber Pass descends into Afghanistan, towards Jalalabad.



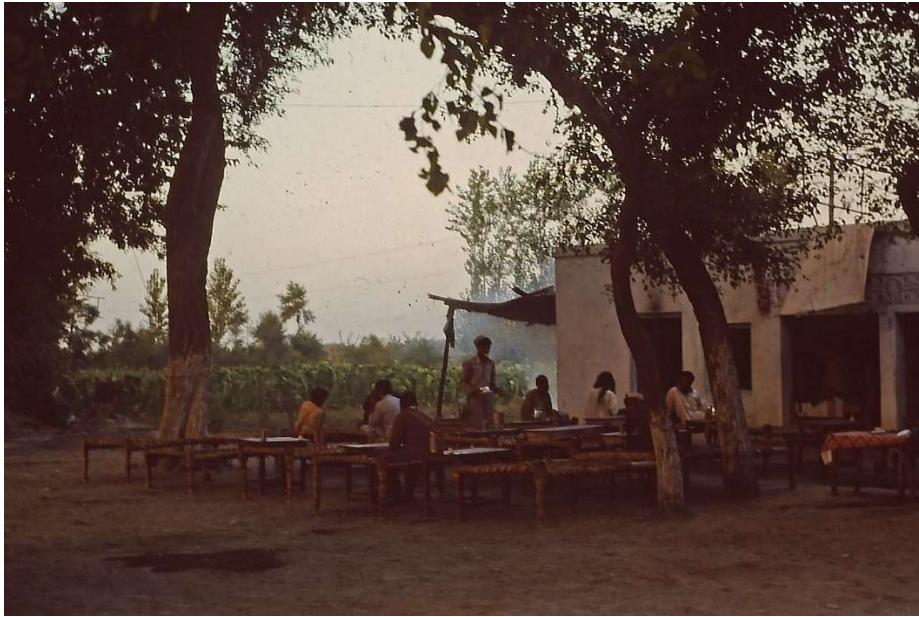
Ali (right), his engineer friend from Peshawar (center) and a Pakistani soldier who joined us to ensure that nobody would shoot at us from Afghanistan.

Part 4: Back to Islamabad.

The day after our drive, I woke feeling decidedly unwell and lethargic. I spent most of the day in bed instead of seeing the old part of Peshawar – a great disappointment. I’ve since seen pictures of the old town, and it appears to be a remarkable place. All I managed was a car trip to a pharmacy, where antibiotic cocktail could be had for the asking. That’s what held me together for the rest of the stay, just well enough to have some other adventures.

We returned in the same sort of passenger wagon, a trip I recall less about because I was still feeling quite unwell. My queasiness wasn’t improved by what I saw when we stopped in one small town. The wagon had parked right next to a typical small restaurant, open at the front. The verge of the road was

gravel, and would have been used not just by animals, but also by men, to relieve themselves, as I remember clearly seeing elsewhere. The stove top, just large enough for the cooking assistant to squat on top of next to the pots he was stirring, occupied a quarter of the space, and tables the remaining area. The assistant took a large pot that needed cleaning, bounded out into the street with a rag in the other hand, scooped up some gravel and scoured the pot. Nobody was suggesting that we eat there, but my appetite for food of any kind immediately went down several notches.



Typical Punjab scenery along
the Grand Trunk Road west
of Rawalpindi



ISLAMABAD AND RAWALPINDI

Islamabad was founded as the new capital of Pakistan in the 1960s on a plain at the foot of the Margalla Mountains. Just twenty kilometers to the south lies the ancient city of Rawalpindi. The two cities could not have been more different in 1981. Islamabad was a tidy collection of widely spaced white buildings filling a rectangular grid of major streets. Rawalpindi was a jumble of narrow streets at all angles, crammed with brown and grey multi-story houses. One of the first things that Ali showed me was how to get from Islamabad to Rawalpindi. There was a place in the broad central area of the city, probably about 30 minutes' walk from the family house, where passenger wagons left every few minutes. They arrived in Rawalpindi at a place called Saddar.

By 1981, when I visited, Islamabad still looked new and incomplete, with few tall buildings. A monumental white, domed mosque was under construction, funding courtesy of the Saudi Arabian Government, at the foot of the mountains and well away from main boulevard that was the center of government. A road had been built to a view-point in the Margalla Mountains, and from there the entire city could be viewed. At the far northern end of the valley lay the government nuclear research laboratories at Nilore.

Ali's family occupied a spacious two-story house, faced and floored with marble tiles, set in a large garden. It was one of several similar properties in the area. Their street was one of the closest to the foothills of the mountains, clearly a very desirable part of town. Ali and his family (his wife Shamsa, his daughter Rubab, and an infant boy) shared with house with his parents, and a continually varying number of extended family members. Males could socialize in one of the smaller downstairs rooms, and women had their space in and around the kitchen. Social spaces where everyone would sit together included a TV room, the entrance hall inside the front door, and the dining room. Bedrooms were upstairs. I don't remember Ali's father using the small room, but he was always present at meals in the dining room. Sitting with the family in the TV room was difficult most of the time. The Urdu soap operas were beyond my comprehension, though I would sit there and try my hardest to pick out recognizable words. Some Australian programs were shown, subtitled. I remember an episode or two of "Skippy" – tolerable, but undistinguished entertainment – and a police-and-malefactor program that was so bad that I was embarrassed.

The summer monsoon had been over for a month or more. The brush on the slopes around the city was still green, but the grass had gone to seed and dried. Javed and one of Ali's brothers decided to take me up the slopes for a hike one morning. The scrub vegetation was unpleasant and thorny, and my socks became so filled with sharp-ended grass seeds that I later discarded them rather than risk introducing such unpleasant plants into Australia. The main thing I remember about the hike is walking through an incipient shanty town just out of sight of the marble mansions. My guides called to the residents of one of the shacks, asking for water.

Back at the house, the last of the monsoon mosquitoes were still present. One of the women in the house was suffering from malaria. I was taking a preventative drug brought from Australia. I came to realize that the family of geckos running across my bedroom ceiling at night were my best friends, eliminating mosquitoes that might alight there while waiting to bite me. The occasional gecko-dropping was a small price to pay for their services.

Meals consisted of curry of different sorts three times a day, served with rice, salad, and fruit afterwards. The curries were excellent, and extremely hot to my taste. This regime was just fine until I returned, feeling ill, from the trip to Peshawar. At that stage, my digestive system rebelled. The mere smell of a pot of curry was enough to destroy my appetite, a most embarrassing development. I had to explain to Ali, and thereafter tried to eat mainly bland things like rice, salad and bananas, with just a little curry occasionally. I would do my best to converse with Ali's father at meal times, but it was difficult to interact. I did manage to talk a little about Islam, and I asked if he had something I could read about it. He produced a short booklet in English. He clearly felt the cultural distance as much as I did, and said at one meal "You just don't understand...." I responded that I was sure I didn't understand everything.

Ali's job, from which he had taken a long leave of absence to study for his doctorate in Tasmania, was as a professor of geology at the Quaid E Azam University in Islamabad. This was a modern structure, and seemed rather empty at the time I went to visit. There were some geology students. Ali asked me to give a talk. The student audience was reluctant to be there – it was one of the worse lecturing experiences I have had, as regards my sensing the involvement of the audience. Ali had to harangue them to get them to come inside. It was also difficult for me, because I was still new to the "trade." I hadn't had advance warning before leaving for the trip, and didn't arrive prepared with a set of slides. I managed to put together something about porphyry copper deposits.

Ali wasn't on vacation, and had to get some work done in between showing me around. So one morning he said it would be a good idea if I could go into the business area of the city and look into purchasing the long-distance railway ticket I would need for my return trip to the international airport in Karachi. There was no railway station in Islamabad, but he thought that a travel agent or similar business might be able to help.

The outing involved a walk, not too long, down one of the major streets. No railway tickets were to be had in Islamabad, however, and I was told I would need to go the Railway Reservation Office in Rawalpindi. I soon found my way to the gathering point for the passenger wagons, and had all morning, so I decided to go on my own to Rawalpindi. I think someone in Islamabad had told me that the Reservation Office wasn't far from the Saddar, but I had no clear idea of where to go. Once deposited in Rawalpindi, I walked away from the Saddar, picked a likely-looking man on the sidewalk (a man wearing glasses – glasses go with education) and asked him "*Railway Reservation kahan he?*" He told me in English that he would show me, and that it wasn't far, but that first I should have a cup of tea with him. There was a small tea-house nearby, and we sat at a table, drinking tea so strong it was opaque and black, served with sugar and lumpy cream that melted into fatty liquid pools on the surface. Conversation was a matter of personal introductions. The railway office was just a few blocks away. Soon my mission was accomplished, and I was walking back to the Saddar with a one-way sleeper-car ticket to Karachi in my pocket. Many of the merchants in the area around the Saddar were selling brass: bowls, ornaments, old-style carriage lamps, bases for electric lamps and so on, very attractive items that I knew would make fine family presents. After some bargaining of the traditional and expected kind ("I have a wife and family to feed!"), I made my way to the wagons weighed down and clattering like a tinker with a load of kitchen gadgets. There was one particularly fine piece, a thin-walled bowl finely figured with an abstract pattern on outer surface. (One of Ali's sisters, worried that I would be cheated as a foreigner, later told me that the 90 rupee price I paid for that bowl after bargaining was about right.) A wagon-ride later I was walking back up the road to the house in Islamabad, stopping briefly to

buy a bag of pomegranates, fruit I had never tasted before my stay in Lahore, from a street stall – another brief exercise for my Urdu.

Ali was most impressed with my morning's outing. Now that I had succeeded in getting to and from Rawalpindi in one piece, he said I could have a pass for other trips on my own, and those were to be adventures in places much further away.

Islamabad was new, but it already had some interesting businesses. Ali's family had connections with two – a precious stone dealer and a marble workshop. At the dealer's, I was shown beautiful specimens of emerald in pegmatite, and ruby in graphitic marble with books of pale-colored phlogopite mica. In the workshop, I was offered a small circular table top to be machined from a green, mottled marble of my choosing. The marble craftsman also put a small vessel carved from translucent yellow-brown travertine into my hand as I left. I still use it as a pen holder. Best of all was the place where Ali took me after I asked him where I could buy some recordings of traditional music. The National Institute of Folk Heritage had an outlet – a room lined from floor to ceiling with shelves of cassette tapes, hundreds and hundreds of them, covering every imaginable aspect of North Indian classical music recorded by Pakistani masters. However was I going to be able to choose? In the end, I left with four tapes, for sitar, veena, flute and shenai, without sampling any of them (because I couldn't at the store). All of the performances proved to be wonderful.

The great Muslim festival of Eid-ul-Azha fell during my stay. It commemorates God's instruction to Abraham that he should sacrifice his son Isaac, and the substitution of a ram as the burnt offering. The family came together at the house, and gifts of money were given from more senior members to more junior ones. I was included among the recipients by some of Ali's older siblings. I found that a bit embarrassing, not really knowing the customs. Someone explained the customary "older to younger" flow of the gifts, and that presented the obvious solution – that I should add to and pass on the gifts to Ali's nieces and nephews and his daughter Rubab. That seemed to work very well. By late morning, the family was gathering in the garden behind the house. It is the tradition at Eid-ul-Azha that a householder should sacrifice a sheep or a goat, or several if he can afford them. Ali's father was a wealthy man who could afford multiple sacrifices. Five goats had been tethered to pegs along the back garden wall. The ritual butcher arrived, and offered the goats water (a requirement for the Eid sacrifice, and probably for halal butchery in general). He then proceeded to kill each animal by cutting its throat. At that stage, I realized that I was no longer as resilient in the face of animal butchering as I had been while watching my father slaughter sheep on the farm when I was very young. The carcasses were taken away to be dressed, and an abundance of meat was returned to the family. Custom required that it be shared among less fortunate relatives, and, no doubt, the family servants; it also appeared on the lunch and dinner menus in the house. Meat becomes over-abundant for a few days after Eid, and Ali related stories of indigent people refusing such offerings.



Above: Ali's father's house, with the Margalla Mountains behind.



Ali's extended family.
His father and mother stand on either side of the sister in the red sari.



Ali, Shamsa, Rubab (daughter) and their newborn son.



Islamabad, from the south. The new mosque can be seen in the distance.



Quaid-e –Azam
University,
Islamabad

TAXILA

Taxila is an archaeological site about 30 km northwest of Rawalpindi, along the Grand Trunk Road. Ali decided that I could find my way there for a day's outing and have a very good chance of returning. The trip would require a wagon ride from Islamabad to the Saddar in Rawalpindi, where I would easily be able to find a bus along the GTR. All I had to do was get off at the right road junction, and then look for a ride to the Taxila museum, just a few kilometers along a side road.

Having reached the junction, I found that there weren't any buses about to leave for the museum, so I tried hitch-hiking. Two Punjabi men in a car picked me up. I just couldn't get them to understand where I wanted to go – though in retrospect there can't have been too many likely destinations other than the museum for a foreigner along that road. Somehow we had passed the museum by the time it was becoming clear to me that we had driven far further than necessary to get there. Eventually, I convinced them to let me out. That placed me in a lonely area with a few farms on the far side of the Margalla Mountains from Islamabad. How I would ever find my way back was one thought that crossed my mind, but at the same time, it was a lovely day to be in a quiet rural part of Pakistan, so I walked back along the road, pausing at one point to greet an old man working in a field – the only person I could see in the area. He seemed startled at my *Salaam Alaikum* greeting, but returned it enthusiastically. Not too long afterwards a vehicle going in the right direction took me as a passenger, and I was soon at the door of the museum.

Taxila is a major Buddhist archaeological site of northern Pakistan. It was already an ancient city, as much as 1000 years old, in 326 BC, when it fell to Alexander the Great. A second military campaign in the area by Seleucus I in 305 BC reinforced Greek influence, and Taxila became the urban center of one

of several Indo-Greek kingdoms that persisted for two or three centuries in northwestern India and Afghanistan. Greeks remained in the kingdoms, but were eventually absorbed into the local population and into the Buddhist religion. For a Western visitor, a point of interest was the number of inscriptions using the Greek alphabet. My souvenir of Taxila is a pair of coins that I acquired from a man who came up to me surreptitiously in the street. His price was so low that I thought they must be reproductions. Now I'm not so sure. The coins seem too roughly made to be forgeries for the tourist trade – not beautiful enough to be attractive. One, trimmed to a square, is of copper and has a Greek inscription around a head presented as one might expect on a coin from the Mediterranean. The other, a roughly circular coin, may also be of copper, and bears a five-pointed symbol (a human figure?) on both sides. The same symbol is present on the tails side of the trimmed coin. The coins resemble those of the Kushan Empire, which continued using the Greek alphabet until 200-300 AD.

The museum contained artifacts collected over the 60 prior years of excavation at Taxila. At the time of writing (2018), I have few memories of the collection. On the other hand, I vividly remember the man who presented himself as my guide for the museum. At the entrance, I paused for several minutes to examine a large diorama showing the archaeological sites around the museum. Several guides were standing around, waiting to accompany museum visitors. The man in question came up to me and insisted on being my guide. Some time later, in a quiet gallery, he made it abundantly clear that he had identified me as a gay man during the few minutes I spent by the diorama. I hadn't exactly thought I was acting so as to attract that kind of attention. One did not lightly reveal such an interest in Pakistan – at that time or since, I would imagine. (Ali had warned me never to wink at a man in Pakistan; it would communicate sexual intent, and be “a terrible, terrible thing”.) The guide was sufficiently sure of his observations to make his interest known in a context where a mistake would have been disastrous for him. This was not the first or the last such unsought encounter I had had while travelling outside Australia. The effect – on someone generally assuming that he was minding his business and giving out no signals whatsoever – was profound, an indication that something integral to my nature was at issue and on display to those who had eyes to see. I spent the rest of my visit walking among the excavated temples and courtyards, and trying to process the revelation.

I easily found a multi-coloured bus to take me back to Rawalpindi. It dropped me in a large market square that was not the Saddar. It was in an area that had none of the “cross-roads” feeling of the Saddar, and I felt conspicuous and unwelcome among numerous women wearing black burkahs. I jumped into the first taxi I could find, said “*saddar-ko*” to the driver, and was very pleased when he deposited me at the place where the wagons departed for Islamabad.



The coins I
bought in the
street in
Taxila.



Bus station near Taxila



Here and below: Views of Taxila





MURREE

Ali had had visions of accompanying me to the valley of Gilgit, much further north, where the mountains rise 20,000 feet above the town. For a foreigner, however, road travel to this remote and strategically sensitive part of Pakistan was forbidden. Getting there by air was allowed, and must have been an adventure of its own kind, but service could not be guaranteed for up to a week at a time if weather conditions in Gilgit favored fog. Given that I would need to arrive on a certain day in Karachi for my return flight to Australia, I had to settle for a less ambitious adventure, a solo trip to Murree.

The rulers of the British Empire in India, in common with their Mughal forerunners, disliked spending the summer on the sweltering Indo-Gangetic plain. Any who could, dependent family members in particular, would travel to hill stations – towns in the forested mountains – to spend the difficult months in a cool, green environment. Small towns, exclusively for the British and their servants, sprang up in the mountains from the Himalayas to the southernmost extent of the Western Ghats, commonly in places where there had been no pre-existing settlements. They could therefore be designed to please the English eye, a town or village centered on an Anglican church, but clinging improbably to a steep slope. Murree, about 30 km north of Islamabad, was one such hill station near the edge of Pakistani Kashmir.

Ali saw me on to the bus one afternoon, having given me instructions about how to find accommodation on my arrival. The mountain road was slow for the bus, and we arrived not too long before nightfall. I found my way to the inn along a street that followed a ridge crest, and settled into what must have been

typical quarters for a Pakistani traveler – very plain, with linens not too clean, and a mattress not too comfortable -- and all part of the experience. I went out to explore a little in the evening, and was quite proud of myself for working out how to ask the proprietor of the inn in Urdu what time the shops would close, and for understanding the answer (9 p.m.).

I was to spend two days in Murree. For the first day, I explored the town, beginning with a cup of tea with a young Pakistani man who was walking the other way along the main street. He stopped me and invited me (in English) to tea and conversation at a nearby tea-house. My remaining memories of the town are of the tourist shops, which sell Kashmiri crafts quite unlike what one can find in Rawalpindi. The items I found attractive were embroidered tea-cozies, shawls, wall-hangings and cushion covers, the kind without little mirrors sewn into the patterns. My brass purchases in Islamabad and Rawalpindi notwithstanding, I still felt the need for a supply of gifts, which Murree provided abundantly.

For my second day, I decided to go exploring beyond the town, on foot. Because Murree was built on a mountain top, that meant following a steep road downhill. I chose the road to Bhurban. The first few kilometers passed through pine forest in which I saw a pair of black birds with long, shiny tails, and flowering gentians. The road passed a boarding school that seemed to cater to girls of European origin, and had young English women as teachers, one of whom turned and smiled shyly at me. Eventually I reached the bottom of the mountain, in an area that had been denuded of any of the forest it once bore, and was encrusted with small villages (in the valley bottoms and on densely populated terraced slopes) and hundreds of individual houses on certain ridges. The ridge-top houses were revealed by the reflected sunlight on their windows. After walking several more kilometers I reached a dusty village. I was received in friendly fashion by men I met in the main street. One came over to talk, and pointed out a colleague who seemed less talkative, perhaps because he knew no English. The colleague, he said, had some English ancestry. The men seemed to like the fact that I was Australian. I decided that I had done enough walking – it must have been between 10 and 20 kilometers – and turned back towards Murree. Just as I was leaving the village, an old man rushed out of his house to ask “Sahib, can you tell me what is cream soup?” – a surprising question. I wonder where he had heard of such a soup? I did my best to explain in English that he might understand.

I had noticed buses coming and going along the road during my walk, and I was feeling tired, so I decided to hail a bus for the trip back to Murree. The driver was happy to take me, but asked me a question that amounted to why on earth I had walked all the way down, just to take a bus back to the top? In other words, my presence as a foreigner involved in an unusual activity had not gone unnoticed. Once in Murree, I collected my luggage, found a bus to Islamabad, and headed “home”.

In 2002, I heard a news report of a terror attack on the Murree Christian School, situated in pine forest just outside the town. The description matched closely that of the school I walked past, except for the fortified gates, a later addition, no doubt, in troubled times.



The hill station at Murree. Note the English church.



The mountain slopes below Murree, viewed from the mountain top.



Densely populated
mountain slopes at
Bhurban..





Gentians in the pine forest below Murree.

KARACHI

My stay in Islamabad drew to a close, and my flight from Karachi to Perth was imminent. In those days, the international airlines insisted on confirmation three days ahead. However, making a phone call from Islamabad to Karachi was not easy. After two or three tries I gave up, and decided to try again a day before my flight, when I would be in Karachi. Ali had arranged for me to stay with some of his relatives there.

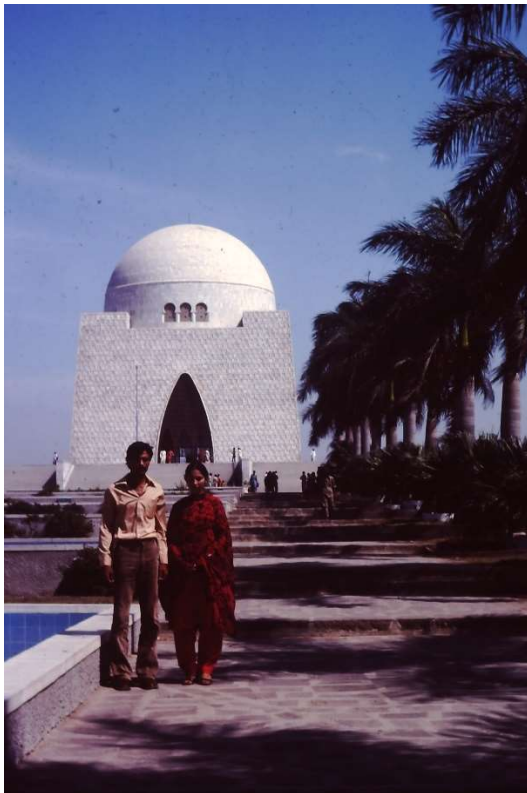
The train set out from Rawalpindi in the mid-morning, and was to arrive in Karachi about 24 hours later. The train staff gave me a compartment to myself, with a private bathroom. This turned out to be a relief, because any control I had managed to exert over the illness I first experienced in Peshawar was rapidly evaporating. The route retraced some of the journey from Lahore, crossing the Potwar plateau and descending to the Punjab plain, where it turned south towards the Indus Valley. We reached Multan, where I alighted and bought some refreshments, with plenty of daylight to spare. The train chugged on down the valley, and by sunrise the next morning was near Hyderabad. At that stage of the journey, views of the countryside were limited by the flatness of the land and the dusty air. Ali's relatives soon found me on the railway platform, and whisked me off to their house by car.

I thought I had seen every kind of wheeled vehicle I could imagine while I was in rush-hour traffic in Lahore, but Karachi added a new and very visible species to the list. High wooden carts drawn by pairs of camels yoked to a pole that curved high above their backs were common in the dusty streets of this desert city.

My first task was to confirm my flight. A local phone call to the airline was easily arranged, and was answered by a bossy woman who took it upon herself to complain about my failure to confirm in time. I assured her that I would have done just that if the national telephone network had worked, and felt like adding: *so what do you intend to do about it?* My flight was confirmed. We had a day or so to look

around Karachi. Towards evening we drove along a beach, where my hosts pointed out a building that was to have been a casino, a plan that failed to mature under the Islamo-puritan dictatorship of Zia ul Haq. The next day, my hosts chose an outing to the Quaid E Azam Mausoleum. Quaid E Azam, whose full name was Q.E.A. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, better known simply as Jinnah to many Westerners, was responsible for the partitioning of India in 1947, and is revered as the founding father of Pakistan. His mausoleum is a tall, arched, stone building set in the center of a broad platform paved with polished stone. It is designated as holy ground, to be approached barefoot out of respect. The middle of a sunny day in Karachi, even in October, is not a recommended time to cross the platform. We had to run, trying not to plant the soles of our feet flat on the platform, to reach the cooler stone in the shade of the mausoleum. The hot stone hurt, but nobody sustained burns. Afterwards we went shopping for cloth goods. I remember trying on some shirts, but couldn't find any that were a good fit. In the end, I was successfully tempted by a brown *shalwar kamis* (sadly, I no longer fit into the *kamis*). In a neighboring store I bought a beautiful cotton batik tablecloth with matching serviettes.

I arrived in Pakistan with a partly empty rucksack as my luggage, thinking that I might like to have some space for Pakistani souvenirs. On my last day in Karachi I packed it to the brim with brass pieces, cloth goods, cassette tapes and one or two stone items. The Indian subcontinent produces wonderful crafts, and the pieces I obtained in Pakistan are still among my favorite souvenirs. I also left replete with memories of a land unlike any other I had visited to that point, and of the kindness of Ali and his extended family.



My Karachi hosts at the Quaid E Azam Mausoleum