

From Malakand with Love!

By Shaikh Muhammad Ali

My good fortunes in this life are due to being blessed with an amazing family. In countless ways, big and small; they have inspired and continue to enlighten me. My better half, the love of my life; Sabeen is a wonderful picnic manager. For reasons beyond expression; this article is dedicated to her! The last time that I travelled to the ‘Switzerland of the East’, yes SWAT was in 1986 when I could not meet my pen friend in Peshawar after travelling for 35 hours from Karachi in ‘Khyber Mail’ probably the slowest train in Pakistan then and would still be the slowest even after a lapse of 24 years now. Chuckles.

This pen friend and the Khyber mail trip indeed takes me down memory lane but I better return fast or else my wife will surely not give me breakfast today. Yes, in this part of the world (we being a male chauvinistic society) still enjoy the privilege of our wives making breakfast for us just like she does for my three little brats. I can see my friends from the West cursing my luck.

Not that she is forced to do this but she actually loves pampering me and I normally enjoy the honors. I can be such an ass sometimes. Right? Laughter! Coming back to the discussion; I had made friends with the Director (P&D) of University of Malakand sometime in 2009 and told him about my last trip to Swat and he vehemently asked me to revisit the place.

The pilgrimage:

This invitation stuck in my mind and heart and lo and behold come the first week of March 2010, I decide to take the pilgrimage of course along with my crazy family of five. Took a casual leave (which I am entitled to take 24 times in a year) on Friday the 5th March 2010 from work while the first Saturday of the month being off; we rolled towards the mountains (like we always do on long weekends).



(On the Motorway heading for Malakand Division)

Chakdara, Malakand. Does the name ring a bell? It better do since Malakand is about 26 kilometers from Mingora. One of the hottest places on mother earth till 3 months or so ago. Yes, the most happening place which was the center piece of terrorism with Metal fighting metal, Souls fighting Souls. Pakistani fighting Pakistanis. Muslims fighting Muslims. Right?

Well, if that is what you believe then you are absolutely wrong, Sir. It is a clash of civilization taking place right in the heart of Pakistan with foreign funding being paid in hard cash, yes greenbacks to corrupt our younger generation and to ruin the name of Islam by foreign agencies which we continue to call 'hidden hands' in this part of the planet. The government sleeps. The Moulvis frolic. The Army becomes trigger hungry again and the intermediaries which I call 'Consultants' in this case make hay while the sun shines.

It is rather easy to delve into this subject over and over again but I must behave and come back and write my piece. So off we went to visit the University of Malakand in Chakdara, Dir. Surprisingly, the university is in Chakdara city but is still called the University of Malakand which is actually another city. On my asking the local folks, I came to learn that this entire area lies in the Malakand Division and thus the name of the university.



(Getting slightly closer – So close yet so far away)

Well, talking about breakfast; my wife is up from her deep slumber and is indeed in the kitchen making breakfast for me. See. I told you I was good at this.

We stopped for lunch at Rashakai, a place where you leave the fabulous motorway and traverse on older and slightly rotten roads. But I must hurriedly confess that the NWFP province hosts the best roads in Pakistan. Rashakai has lately become popular with women in Islamabad apparently because cloth is being sold cheaper there and with a lot of variety. So ladies in Karachi and Lahore, pack your bags, book your flights and hotels & rush to Islamabad so that you can ruin your husband's happiness by dropping while shopping @ Rashakai! A shopper's paradise just 95 kms from Islamabad. Goodies being served on first come- first serve basis. Ladies, is your adrenaline running already?



(Family lunch @ Rashakai about 95 kms from Islamabad)

While we were stuffing our faces @ Rashakai, the first bomb exploded. No. No. Not an explosion, rather I saw a platoon of the Pakistan army arrive at Rashakai from Rawalpindi not to arrest us but to have lunch at the restaurant. My wife almost threw a tantrum since we were having a first bout with the army and I am sure she must be having fancy ideas already as to whether we should proceed ahead or return to our pit hole aka Islamabad.

Before she had taken this decision, just to make ourselves comfortable that we were heading towards a war zone (well almost); I took my children close to one truck and took a picture with one of the foot soldiers while making friends with him. Actually, he was almost scared to death since he himself was being posted in Swat for the first time but his embarrassment met newer heights when I told him that I was taking my children there as well. Well, it was not his fault since we are all human at the end of the day. Actually deep down inside I was shit scared myself although never showed it all along.



(Three idiots with 'Brave heart' – Muhammed Zaman Malik)

Historical perspective:

Chakdara has been an important trade-route junction for two or three thousand years. Alexander reached the Indus through Dir fording the Swat River here. At strategic Damkot hill, archeologists have found artifacts from the 2nd millennium BC and evidence of a Shahi fort.¹



(The beautiful Chakdara Fort with Plum trees around)

Emperor Akbar garrisoned Chakdara in 1587 in an unsuccessful attempt to take Swat. Nervous after the Chitral siege, the British in 1897 built the present bridge, fort and hilltop picket (among soldiers here then was young - who later

became famous; Winston Churchill, for whom the picket is named). Unfortunately, the Pakistan Army now uses the fort so Damkot Hill is off limits to visitors.²



(A beautiful view of Damkot Hill with the Churchill Picket)

Thanks to our guide Fazal Ur Rahman (who was actually a cook at the guest house) managed to squeeze us past the Churchill Picket and we went up the Damkot hill but please do not spread the news around since I could be charged with trespassing. Laughter.



(A scenic view from Damkot Hill with Churchill Picket in the background)

Back to the main story:

After having lunch on the last leg of the Motorway, we took a detour towards Mardan city. I would not write about Mardan since I have already written in detail about this beautiful place with amazingly hospitable people in my other article on ‘Takht-e-Bahi’ which can indeed be appreciated on my writing space on SCRIBD.



(Passing through the Mardan city with the Railway station on the left)

We just breezed through Mardan, Takht-e-Bahi (although we did stop for 5 minutes for Qahwa) and headed for Dargai which is about a 40 minutes drive from Mardan City.



(The entrance to Dargai)

Another 25 minutes drive from Dargai we started ascending towards the Malakand Top.



At the foot of this all-weather pass is the Dargai Fort and at the Top is Malakand Fort, where Pashtuns led by the ‘Mad Mullah of Malakand’ rose against the British in 1897.³



(The only tunnel on the way to the Malakand Top)

On both sides of the pass and through a tunnel under it, runs the Swat Canal; robbing the Swat River to irrigate the plain. North at Chakdara is the turning and bridge to Dir and Chitral while straight on is Swat’s gateway, a police post at Landakai village.⁴



(Where do we want to go today – Chitral or Swat?)

Once you drop off Malakand Top, you reach an unassuming Batkhela village. The most interesting thing about Batkhela is (which most Pakistanis may not know) that it hosts the longest bazaar in the entire Pakistan. I heard that it is between 3–5 kilometer long. Indeed, with the traffic crush, it took us forever to get through this long, snaky bazaar.

After reaching Batkhela, it was already getting close to evening and I was trying to reach the destination as soon as possible before Maghreb prayers i.e. dusk. I must hurry to mention that since I always travel with my family on such trips, I make it a point that I always reach the destination before sun set. There is no point in taking risk with small children while driving in the night at new places and especially in the mountains. Death is indeed inevitable but why kill yourself early anyways?

It took us about 15 more minutes to reach the University of Malakand which is although situated in Malakand Division but housed in the city of Chakdara, Dir. While reaching close to the University, we passed by the famous Dir Museum but of course it was closed since it was after 5:00 p.m. and I marked it for attack on the next day.

We reached the University around sixish and were welcomed by the amazing hospitality of Fazal Ur Rahman who was the Cook cum House keeper of the guest house. After freshening up for a while, we had ‘Qahwa’ (Green tea) with him and after having an early home cooked sumptuous dinner, we all retired to bed early. Lest I forget to mention that the temperature was slightly above zero degree Celsius and may have fallen lower in the night since we used double blankets not to mention the electric heater which was practically on; the entire night.

The next morning (as always) I was up for Fajr prayers i.e. around 5:30 a.m. said my prayers and went out for a brisk walk in the woods. It was a chilly morning on 6th March 2010, much chillier than Islamabad. Although I am not sure, but we were at an altitude of approximately 5,000 feet above sea level or so.

The children got up around 8:00 a.m. and we had Omelets, Chai (Tea) and Paratha. Paratha (Pakistani style oily bread) I would hate to translate. It simply kills the taste. Fazal was indeed a marvelous cook and a wonderful host simultaneously.



(Fazal Ur Rahman feeding the brats)

After having breakfast, I was invited by my host i.e. Mr. Ilyas Iqbal; the Director (Planning & Development) of the University of Malakand to visit the university. Adil & Mohsin (my two princes) came along for the trip while Ayesha (my little angel) and Sabeen stayed for makeup (Laughter). Ilyas took us around the humongous university in a coaster (type of Toyota Van) and gave us a short tour round campus.



(Proof that I was at the University)

I was amazed to see the size of the university which was close to around 1,400 or so acres and surprisingly included an entire hill within its periphery. I have yet to visit a university in my entire life which owns a hill. Yes, an entire God damn hill!



(With our fabulous host i.e. Mr. Ilyas Iqbal, Director (P&D), Univ. of Malakand)

I was more surprised to learn through my host that the university came into being in the year 2002 whereby it was converted from the biggest wood processing factory in Asia. The factory was incurring huge losses year after year and thus it was finally converted into a university. Legend has it that the equipment worth Rs. 300 million was sold off to a businessman for Rs. 3 million in Faisalabad

and it practically took 6 months to transport the equipment. What an irony!

The university is a shambles while the huge deteriorating workshop has been converted into a garage for the university's fleet of buses; the shabby residential quarters of the workers have been turned into student hostels. The better houses built for officers are where the faculty resides now. Strange buildings have been turned into much stranger outlets.



(Work going on around the herbarium)

There is a herbarium in the making along with two green houses already in place. Instead of concentrating on the WATSAN yes water & sanitation issues of the student and faculty hostels, I wonder what is the point in squandering public money on brick & mortar first. They can always be developed once the Maslow's needs of hierarchy are in place.



(The green houses among a rhapsody of grotesque planning)

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With no offense to anyone involved in this Immaculate Conception, I personally feel that having a university here was the most foolish of ideas. Let me rush to explain my perspective as to why I feel this way before Ilyas takes an offense.

Although, the university serves a huge and burgeoning population around the area with a current student strength of 4,000 + students who even come all the way from Multan which may be at a distance of about 700 kms from here but that is beside the point. The city (wonder if I can call it a city in the first place) does not host a single hospital.



(Moulvi Sahib @ the gates of knowledge)

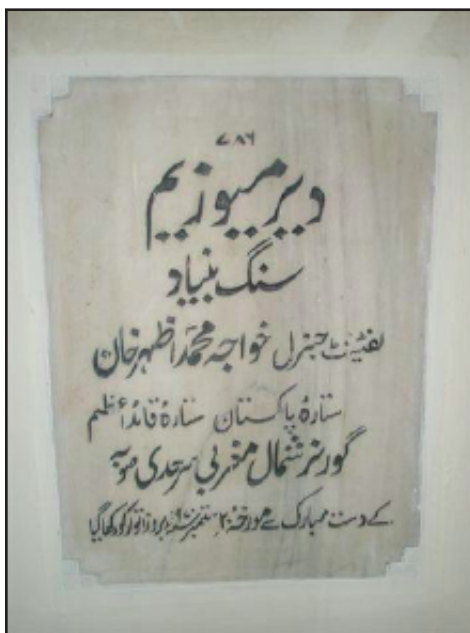
Yes, no hospital at all. How can education be more important than life; I fail to cherish. For any emergencies, the entire city / village of Chakdara have to march either to Dir northwards or to Batkhela southwards in order to reach a small district hospital. Yes, a distance of about 15 hilly kms has to be traversed before a decision of one's life or death could be taken. What a farce! I assume emergencies do not happen in this part of the world. Laughter!

Sorry, Ilyas; I blew this one up. No wonder, my Mom calls me a firey writer and yes I am proud of it too. You may please go ahead and call me 'Shameless moron' and I can bet I will continue to speak the truth and nothing but the truth!

After spending some value added time with Ilyas @ the university and cribbing about life in general, we came back & headed for the other goodies packed up by God for us on this trip. Fazal, being a strategic host had already called up his friend to fry fish for us that is caught from the Swat River and is served direct from the brew to make it ready by lunch time.

We first stopped at the Dir Museum. Incidentally, it was closed for renovation but with Fazal's skills he somehow managed to squeeze inside and convince the Director / Curator personally to throw open the gates for us. We, being from

Islamabad, the Capital City were hurriedly rushed in. Islamabad, the City which is about 5 kms from Pakistan. The throne of Power, Military, Establishment, Bureaucracy. All but farcical comedy. No more, no less!



(I wish this was in English. The laying stone of Dir Museum)

The museum was opened in 1979 and is tucked at the village's main entrance. Exhibits include amazingly well-preserved Buddhist statuary, beautiful carved columns and lintels from an old mosque of Swat and an ethnographic section with eye-popping embroidery and lots of jewelry.⁵

The Curator i.e. Dr. Zain himself came out to greet us while we almost thought that we may not be allowed to enter this small master piece of the history of this region. 'Hospitality of the Pathan' came out in full force when Zain Sahib hugged me and allowed us in with full honors.

Zuhr prayers was about to be offered and the three of us males in the Shaikh clan bowed & prostrated to the Lord, God almighty. Dr. Zain personally took us around the museum and while walking around with him I felt the power, humility, authority of this man who had a PhD in Greek archeology and had been heading the Dir museum for the last eight (8) years.



(Inside the Dir museum with the curator i.e. Dr. Zain)

Just to throw some light about his level on the seat of power, he narrated that he was usually summoned by the then Prime Minister i.e. Mr. Short Cut Aziz when he was invited to lay bricks @ a new museum opening up somewhere on the planet and Mr. Zain would pass him the knowledge about that region (as if Mr. PM did understand all that archeology).



(A rare relic at the Dir Museum, 'In the name of God' inscribed on the rock)

God does open up close doors on me. Yes, I thank you God for fulfilling your promise to a Momin. My enemies can rot in their self generated hells. Eureka. Laughter!

After having a bout with history, archeology, this God fearing, fun loving, risk taking family headed for the Swat River. Instead of reaching the river through Mingora which was hardly about 26 kms from here (a hot spot till late due to the terrorism issue) we headed towards the hills of Shamozi to reach at the maximum height of the hill overseeing the other side of the scenic Swat river. Had it not been for Fazal, camera happy tourist s like us could never have reached here since this particular route is only known to locals.



(On top of the Shamozi Hill)



(A beautiful view of the Swat River in the background)



(His Royal Highness before he was thrown in the river)

After touching the skies we retreated back to civilization and before reaching the side of the river, we picked our Fried fish from the makeshift Hilton Continental at the mouth of the road skirting down to the Swat River.



(Our makeshift Hilton Continental where the chickens come home to roost along with the fish before they die and scavenged by animals called 'Humans')

It had been ages that we had fish like this. Trust me, if you were there, you will forget about eating fish at Cairo Hilton, Burj Ul Arab, at Champs Elyse's or at the Trump Plaza in New York for that matter. Simple fish. Simple life. Simply splendid!



(The metaphorical 'Last supper' by the Swat River)

On the way back, we frolicked at the beautiful fall (Abshaar) close to the Damkot Hill. There seem to be no particular name for this Abshaar but we stopped and enjoyed anyways. Clean air. Clean water. Clean fun! We are loving it minus the McDonalds.



(Frolic @ the Water Fall)

Although we were initially planning to leave town after this escapade since Sabeen was slightly concerned about the security issues due to the proximity to the war zone but somehow Fazal (with his strategic emotional blackmails) convinced us to stay for one more night. And stay we did.

Again after having a slightly lighter dinner this time around, we slept after enjoying the traditional Qahwa while our bodies slightly acclimatizing with the chilly climate. After saying my Fajr prayers, I responded to a little over 35 e-mails (offline);

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we had a late breakfast around 10 a.m. and left the guest house heading for home.

With a lot of sharp memoirs from yet another hospitable trip in the mountains of NWFP, I was driving with a heavy heart of losing wonderful new found friends. Yes, the Pathans who indeed could die for a friend. They have inspired me from day one since I have moved to Islamabad from Karachi in mid 2002 and have left a strong mark on my heart. I am miserably trying to learn Pashto and one fine morning I will probably write a book titled 'The way of the Pathan' or 'My escapades in N.W.F.P'.

On the way back, we stopped to buy 'Palai Maltay' (type of Oranges) from Malakand top. I tell you these are the best 'Maltay' you can get in the entire N.W.F.P province just like the 'Khanpur Maltay' in Punjab or the 'Sargodha Kinoo' from Sargodha.



(This picture was taken after feasting on the 'Palai Maltay')

After feasting on the 'Palai Maltay', we stopped for paying our homage at the mausoleum of the famous 'Mad Mullah of Malakand'. The story goes that once the British took control of the Sub Continent in the late nineteenth century, they headed towards the north of Pakistan (Sub Continent then) under the false hope that they would be able to control the honorable Pathan as well.



(At the mausoleum of Ghazi Sikandar Shah Shaheed)

By late 1895, the Pathans from Malakand Division formed their forces to go head on with the British and gave them a tough time. Ghazi Sikandar Shah (Shaheed) aka martyr remembered as the ‘Mad Mullah of Malakand’ by the British was the supreme commander of the Pakhtun forces. He fought with gallantry and thus was martyred on the Malakand top where he is buried today.

We got on the motorway around 4:30 p.m. and after having tea at Rashakai, we stopped for Asr prayers and then headed home.



(Asr Prayer break @ Rashakai, NWFP)

Indeed we were all tired but the little ones got lucky since they could sleep in the back seat of my Mercedes oops Santro!



(All's well that ends well)

PS. This article took me about 16 hours to complete and it would probably take at least a year to write something as fine as this one, lest I take another escapade on the same planet! Adios.

Notes:

¹ *The lonely planet, Pakistan*, John King – Bradley Mayhew – David St. Vincent, 5th Edition, July.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.