

## Rafting to Radicals

In the late 1970's, I found traveling in the Hindu Kush (North Western Pakistan) to be an incredible opportunity to witness such a different way of life to my own. I never realized, at the time, that the area would become a hot-bed for terrorism a number of years later. It is sad to recognize that children with whom I interacted may now view the world so differently from myself, or that they could have died violently. I have no idea how those children have fared since that time. But I do find it very disturbing to reflect on these memories in light of what is currently happening in this country and how we have been affected by acts of terrorism, here and abroad.

The following two tales are about incidents from the time when a group that I had joined traveled around the Hindu Kush forty years ago. All of our group were employed by an oil company in Saudi Arabia. Being a 28 year old, I found the potential adventure to be very attractive. I had originally intended traveling to Afghanistan, but sadly the Russians invaded before I could arrange my trip. So I decided to join this group exploring the Hindu Kush as a substitute destination. When we all had signed up for the group, we were warned that this was not just a normal tour group – there could be some hardships.

We found the indigenous people of the North Western Pakistan to be generally peaceful - but I will admit that many displayed a suspicion of foreigners. These people lived in some of the harshest, but exquisitely beautiful, mountains through which I have ever ventured.

Our tour group was transported around in three jeeps driven by local tribesmen. The drivers needed to be local to dare drive on most of the roads that wound into the mountains surrounding our base location: a town called Gilgit. Narrow roads ran along ledges that had been carved into rock faces that reared vertically for thousands of feet. They wove down gorges dancing an intertwining path with raging rivers. They meandered their way across wider valleys in which fields still lay fallow after the previous year's harvest. Occasionally, they tenuously snaked their way across huge scree fields where rock slides and instability were constant dangers.

On one day's outing, we were headed towards the Kyber Pass, which was the crossing point into Afghanistan. The road climbed alongside a river that cascaded down a series of rapids and small waterfalls. In quieter sections, the river was large enough for locals to use it for transportation between villages, but stretches like these rapids were not navigable. Close to the top of one section, we met two local men and we stopped to look at what weighed them down.

They carried a crude handmade raft that they used to transport produce down to the local market. The frame was constructed of sturdy tree branches that were tied firmly with strips of hide. Thinner branches formed a deck on which the men sat to paddle and their goods were stored. But to me, the most fascinating part of the raft was the truly classic form of floatation: four inflated sheep stomachs. I suspected that the raft

which measured about ten feet by six feet weighed between one and two hundred pounds. They carried it's unwieldy weight on their shoulders, which caused them to stagger over the rocky uneven trail despite their being young, strong and agile.

Our guide / translator talked with them about their use of the raft. They said that they regularly ferried goods along the river as it was the most direct and quickest route to Gilgit. They always had to carry their raft alongside this stretch of the river due to the waterfalls. They later would return for the goods that they had left with their third companion at the top of the rapids. While we talked, the men held the raft on their shoulders as putting it down and picking it up again was more effort. I leaned against the keep watching them as they shifted the raft on their shoulders to hold the raft's weight. I was amused when the two of them wanted to look at each other's pictures. Their delight at seeing a photograph of their partner was immediate: big grins and much chatter and laughter. I wondered how their third member was going to feel when they excitedly showed the pictures to him, later.

When we initially arrived in Gilgit, we had been warned that taking photographs of many local people could be problematic as they felt that taking a photograph of a person was like stealing their soul. I had heard of this issue previously and was aware that asking permission was necessary before taking photographs of people while trying to ensure that other people were not in the frame. Our guide asked if we could take photographs of them, which created some very heated debate between the two men. But after a few minutes, they agreed and we all dodged around finding interesting vantage points. This was back in the days before cell phones - we had bulky SLR cameras and one woman in our group had the latest invention - a Polaroid camera.

For those who may not know about Polaroid cameras, they acted like a normal camera while taking the shot, but then it immediately produced a blank 4 x 4 photograph that gradually developed into a full colored photograph. The transition from a blank piece of photographic paper to a faint image and finally to a fully resolved picture took about 30 seconds or so.

The woman took a Polaroid photograph of the men and handed the still blank card to the man at the front of the raft. He examined it with a puzzled look. Then his eyes widened as he started to yell excitedly at the man at the back. The man at the back started jumping around frantically trying to see what was happening, but he could not just drop the raft. By the time the photograph was fully developed, the man holding it realized that the picture was of him. The look of delight and intrigue spoke louder than any words could have expressed. The woman took a second picture: focusing on the man at the rear of the raft. Again there were cries of amazement as the picture developed right there in his hand.

The men continued down the rocky road having placed their photographs in a safe place while we ventured further up the valley knowing that they had stories to tell their grandchildren in years to come. I suspect that those photographs took up prominent

positions in their homes and that many resulting conversations involved the magical transition from a blank card to a colored photograph.

On another day, we travelled to a village that lay at the upper end of a beautiful valley that was fertile enough to support a large area of grain as well as fruit orchards. Just above the village, the local village chief and arbiter of local justice had his home and office. We were invited to his compound and through our guide / interpreter, he told us that he was called "Rajah" by the other villagers. The title "Rajah" came from the British Empire's days in India and surrounding areas: the title implied king or prince. We could not tell if it was a valid title or if he had a slightly inflated ego. We were invited to have tea with him and to meet his family. After that interaction and despite his living in the largest and only modern house in the village, I decided it was probably a case of inflated ego.

After leaving his compound, our group were free to tour around the village on our own for a couple of hours. The main village center was just a collection of mud-walled houses that lay alongside the main trail that ran through the valley. I decided to head off into the surrounding fields. Small pathways wound their way around the fields to form a tight network. It allowed the villagers to easily move from their houses to their fields. The only signs of farm implements were made of wood and occasionally of iron. Very few of them were set up to be tethered to animals, so I assumed most labor was performed manually. As I wandered further down the valley, I found a few farms that were definitely separated from the village, but were close enough for their communal security.

I wandered past a field that had been prepared for planting while taking in the scenery and enjoying the warm Spring weather. A young local man came from the opposite direction and he greeted me with "Hallo, how are you doing, today?"

I stopped in my tracks - he had just spoken to me in very good English. I turned to look directly at him and replied "Excuse me for asking, but your English is very good. I am surprised to find someone in this area who speaks such good English language. Where did you learn it?"

As he looked over towards the nearby farms, he explained "I recently graduated from Karachi University with a degree in Engineering. I learned English for my class work. I hoped you spoke it so that I could try for a moment. I live in one of the farms, which allows me little chance to try English." I was amazed and a thousand questions flashed through my mind. While I worked out which to start with, he invited me home for tea. I have since realized that this invitation was made within 100 miles of the supposed venue in the now infamous book "Three Cups of Tea".

As we walked along the pathway, I thought I should introduce myself "By the way, my name is Barry. What is yours?"

He held out his hand to shake mine “I am Hassan. Welcome to my home. I will introduce you my family.”

He led me over to the first farmhouse that lay just a hundred yards away. We entered a courtyard through a gated entranceway. The surrounding wall that was made of rock and mud stood about six feet high. The courtyard comprised flat stones in parts and a large flat area of packed down dried mud. We crossed onto the farmhouse veranda that was shaded by the roof extension, which was a welcome relief as the sun was burning bright. Before walking into the small single story farmhouse, I was introduced to Hasan’s mother who had been sweeping off the wooden veranda. The cottage’s meager interior said so much about the family’s poverty. There were no internal walls, just a few flimsy curtains to partition off small sections when necessary and there was little furniture. I was introduced to his sister and younger brother: they along with their mother spoke no English and so my host, Hassan, translated for them. We sat talking and drinking tea for a while. I was intrigued to know Hassan’s past: he had been a boy from such an extremely poor area of remote Northern Pakistan. I asked “Hassan, how did you manage to gain a place at a university and ultimately a degree?”

He told of going to the village school, which only took boys back then, and that their teacher had been strict and academically sharp. Hassan was always top of his class, which led to his teacher forwarding his name for a Government sponsored degree at a state university. He passed all of the requisite exams and he was accepted into the university. He found it very lonely as he was used to the small tight-knit community here in his village. After four years, he graduated but could not find any work in Karachi. So, he drifted back to the village even though he understood more about the larger world than most of his neighbors and family could ever imagine. As intrigued as I was about him, he was intrigued by my circumstances. He said he dreamt of moving to England to work and to apply all that he had learned. Listening to his questions and his explanations about his current situation, I quickly realized that he was confused and frustrated by his circumstances.

He said that occasionally the village chief would ask for his expertise to fix a piece of machinery. Hassan decided to walk me over to see his most frequent project. The villagers had built a communal water-powered grinding mill, years before. It was used often during certain times of the year and then stood unused for months. As it was rather old and crudely constructed, it frequently broke down. He was the only person in their village who had enough knowledge to fix it.

We had to duck down to enter the small building, which straddled a small stream as it ran towards a series of channels that irrigated the fields. Internally, the building only measured about six feet square, which must have caused problems for Hassan when he was crawling around trying to mend the grinding mechanism. The grinding stones were about two feet in diameter, which gave them sufficient capacity to grind all of the villagers’ annual harvest of grains. The farmers dried the harvested grains by hanging it over the branches of their fruit trees so that drying was quicker in the wind and sun. Their labors would hopefully produce enough flour to keep the village stocked

throughout the coming year. The water mill kept him occupied for a day or two each month, for which the village chief paid him a pittance: it was more like pocket change than a real income. We departed the water mill and headed back to his family's farmhouse.

Back at the farm, we chatted for a while before it was time for me to return to my group. As I prepared to leave, his mother started to hunt around the poorly stocked house. I soon began to realize, she was trying to find a gift to give me as I left. As a guest in their house, it was polite for me to give a gift in exchange. Thankfully, I had bought some trinkets in a market the day before and they were still in my pack. I pulled one out to give to Hassan's mother. While I had done this, she apparently had found something to give me.

We exchanged gifts out on the front courtyard. She smiled and thanked me. I looked down at the object that she had placed in the palm of my hand - I had never seen anything quite like it before. I smiled in thanks and asked Hassan to thank her for the gift and her hospitality. Hassan walked with me back to the center of the village.

When we reached our jeeps and the other members of the group, he said "Barry, I cannot tell you how much I enjoyed our time together, especially as opportunity like this are not normal. I am grateful to had a chance to speak my English and keep me in touch with larger view of the world and all that it has possibly offer."

I wondered if there was a practical way for us to stay in contact. But considering how remote his village was, I realized that I needed to say farewell "Hasan, I really did appreciate your company and your family's hospitality. It was great to have the opportunity to talk with you about your life that, presently, is based in the village. I hope that you will find opportunities that bring you satisfaction and a decent income. We must head back to Gilgit before darkness. Thanks for everything. Bye."

We boarded the open-top Jeeps and bundled up against the chill that had descended onto the valley as soon as the sun disappeared behind the peaks that lay so far above us. As we started the drive back to Gilgit, I pulled out my gift and tried to work out what it could be. It was spherical, brown, highly polished, felt a little rubbery and had a sweet aroma. I showed it to otters and they all scratched their heads without even a suggestion. I had not wanted to insult Hasan's mother by asking what it was, so the mysterious object continued to challenge several of us over the following few days.

Eventually, I decided to ask our guide / translator about it and, thankfully, he immediately knew what it was. He said that it was an apple that had been prepared for long-term storage (left in the rafters of the house for months or years). As soon as he said it, I instantly knew the sweet aroma - that of an over-ripe apple. I decided to check it out by cutting a slice. The flesh was a little dried and not too dis-colored. I decided to not dare to try a bite. Having determined what it was, at last, I was pleased but I also felt very humbled. Here in a remote farming community, Hassan's mother had given me an item of preserved food. They had little money and any stored food could be

essential to their survival in harsh winters. It was not just that she had given me an apple, it was what that apple could potentially mean to them at some point in time. I was in awe of her gift and filled with humility that was an amazing sensation for my maturing mind in its journey to understanding life and people. It was not a gift of gold, but in some ways, that was how it felt.

I now look back on these memories and am still deeply touched by Hassan's Mother's gift. But unfortunately, the history of the last 40 years causes me to question if I witnessed seeds of what potentially was to come.

I wonder how many other graduates of Karachi University have had to return to remote villages, disillusioned – for that was how Hassan seemed to me. If one such educated, but disillusioned, graduate fell under the influence of a radical zealot, then there was the possible starting to another Taliban group with the knowledge to cause huge amounts of destruction and loss of life. It was not a good combination: knowledge, disillusionment and zeal.

But let us not think that this potential problem (Taliban / Isis), which was created by conditions in Pakistan and the Middle East, poses the most serious threat to Western nations. I would suggest that we look at our own problems, closer to home. In our recent past, we have had White Supremacist groups, Nazis and the KKK - they may not have been quite as dangerous as the Taliban or Isis, but they had comparable qualities. They incite and preach violence against other groups within and beyond their own society. They engender fear and hatred, based on false premises. They are actually disowned by the majority of those who they claim to represent. Perhaps, if we could both disempower the voices of the White Supremacists / KKK and remove racism, bias and corruption in Washington, then we may be able to share these tools and understandings with Muslims to undermine and disempower their own radical groups too. A resolution through understanding, communication and education – not aggression and bloodshed.

May Hassan, his children and his grandchildren live in a more peaceful world in which they can float through foaming rapids on handmade rafts with inflated sheep stomachs, and may they do so without concern for hatred, fear, bombs, bullets and war.

Inshallah (If God wills)