

AF-PAK DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURALISM

(Rediscovering Peace through Silk Road)

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22 August 2017, Pakistan

Supported by:  HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
PAKISTAN

Stretching their lovely arms out in the south-east and south-west of the globally improbable Karakoram and Hindukush heights sit the princely beauties of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Both the lands are studded with immense deserts, lofty mountains and majestic riverine valleys. This is the arena where Himalayas, Hindukush, Karakoram and Tianshan mountain-ranges of India, Afghanistan, China and Pakistan intertwine. At the crossroads of Central Asia the Magnificent Pamir Heights end into the fabled towns of Kashghar and Turpan – where mesmerizing vineyards flourish since centuries. Crisscrossing the glorious mountain-tops and ancient empires, Afghanistan and Pakistan raise legendary past and parables to transform their contended anatomy into a blissful abode.

Uzbek, Tajek, Turkmen and Persians in Afghanistan while Sindhi, Siraiki and Punjabi across Pakistan enculturate their respective lands with music, poetry and mysticism while Hazaras, Baloch and Pashtunes inhabit across Helmand and Hindukush with the fact and fictions of their tribal ego and honour. Unique and diverse, as is the flora and fauna, so do the religions and rituals of these people. Many a men still live in their village republics of peace and piety without much concern about the worlds of power and proxy-playing.

Utterly desired by the hour, let us forget bars and borders on map. Let the people from both sides interact and engage, even if the countries stand apart, for Europe has proven the possibility. Let the railways run through Bolan; let the trams pass by Khyber Pass and let the terrains dance in peace and exchange love with Maghreb as would do the camel-led caravans of Taklimakan and burly horses of Farghana in the mist of times.

Despite the so called grab and greed of ‘the strategic possession’ for two centuries, Afghanistan is vivacious enough to inspire and aspire for its divine spirit of harmony and humanity. Utterly shaken by the political turmoil and terror, Pakistan too is capable to manifest its diversified ethos and poetic colours across. Let us unfold that beneath the geo-political fire-and-fury flow the fragrant waters of religio-cultural heritage from one land to the other.

Volumes and volumes of literature and lingua-franca trade across Pakistan and its neighboring fronts to continue with the traditions of common beliefs and festivities. Beyond conflicting-borders and blame-brawls of political pundits, arts and civilizations invoke people to revisit and rethink their past and present differently from the way it is thought or thrust upon people by the powers-that-be. An inspiring and transpiring line or story secretly holds the power to dismantle hostile political narratives and reframe our relations from cultural and ecological perspectives. Apart from other avenues, this worldview opens up panes and windows of transverse travel and tourism too.

History serves time the way geography does to space. Overpowering every odd, Silk Route once carried through the fantasy manors of ‘thousand-and-one-nights’ from Euphrates and Tigris to the kings and queens of Indus and Persia. For over a millennium, the route kept transporting around fiction and fables besides rites and religions as messages of peace and pacifism till the maritime routes began attracting trade and commerce. But so long as the winds keep blowing, sargam and stories never stop crossing maps and measurements. Now turned into a vacuum that struggles with itself and others alike, half a millennia ago, Afghanistan was a metaphor of cross-cultural civilization nurtured by the Silk Route treading.

From the valley of Kashgar, once upon time, a thin route twisted across our beloved Karakoram – now the loftiest highway on earth – to run into the upper Indus down to the fertile plains of Ganges. Its south-western route runs through the Wakhan Corridor of Pamir to the present day Balkh in Afghanistan and further down to Merv in the far-eastern edge of ancient Persian Empire. Traversing through sand-dunes and wind-worn rocks, mercantile convoys carried on the words of wisdom, along with the commodities, to and from the people and places they went across. At the far end of Europe, noblers in Rome would proudly drape themselves with Chinese Silk to please their wives and deities alike. Exotic incense and sandalwood would blush their balconies. Fairy-tales shall fly from east to west and other way round.

“Court ladies, said an anonymous poet, “were draped in silk - a heavenly cloak, threads like geese flying through the autumn skies; its colour is like a spring reflected in a lake”.

In imperial Rome, Chinese Silk was so precious that it was literally weighed in gold while stories walked around for free. Silk Route – with its tributaries and distributaries all across the assorted landscapes – succeeded through unbelievable mysteries and luminosities of Taklimakan and Gobi deserts. Ancient Kingdoms of Samarkand and Bukhara, Neshapur and Tabrez as well as northern valleys of Pakistan to Constantinople kept honoring narrators and rhymesters that voyaged along the same path. Of estranged lands and exotic people, divulge the stories unforgettable.

The present day Pakistanis then would listen the Chinese fables, they in-turn the Tajeks’, Uzbeks’ and Persians’ and the Persians would listen to the people in Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad, and they to the Israelites and Greeks – all enriched by the winding and wondering experiences of Silk Route. Fostered in Taklimakan and Gobi desert, the double-humped, long-eye-lashed camels would transport loads and loads of silk, saffron and scent to oases towns of peace and pleasures. Polo, still very popular in Gilgit-Baltistan, is believed to have been imported from Persia to now Pakistan and to China about 1000 years ago. In return to the invaluable silk, Chinese would saddle in Kyrgyz and Kazak horses, far superior and sturdier than their own variety. However, dismounting from the horses and camel backs, poetry would swivel in the luxurious camps and courtyards of queens and viziers. There from, she will promenade all around.

While flying on the wings of fire, the prophet Zoroaster is believed to have delivered one of the most compelling sermons in monotheistic traditions, three-and-half a thousand years ago here in Balkh. His notion of freewill and individualism, of choice and reason and most importantly ‘of truth and justice’ is the soul of many faiths till this day. "Human creature herself, asserts the Master, possesses the ability to judge ‘what is good’ and ‘what is evil’ by the virtue of ‘reason’ and can assume ‘the responsibility’ of her choice". Hence rites and rituals are no more than extravaganza. It is ‘free will’ and ‘free enquiry’ that commenced the age of enlightenment in our history. Infused by the sacred skies of Zarathustra’s wisdom, blue flames of sagacity still light the earth. Mystic vultures tantamount gods’ rationality. The Sun glows with fire of life.

Zarathustra's unacknowledged spirit deeply permeates the ancient and present Af-Pak and Indo-Persian traditions – both religious and cultural. His lifelong struggle remained to emancipate man from tribal confines and let him rely on individual reasoning – a path to ultimate freedom. Originally based on over a dozen treatises, his Gathas also include zoology, botany, medicine and astronomy. Enthused by his insight, Cyrus, the magnificent Persian King separated clergy from kingdom and introduced the very-first principles of human rights. Even our most influential existential philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, could not escape his influence.

Commonly known as Parsi from Surat and Mumbai to Karachi, Quetta and Multan, Zoroastrians are found to be the peaceful and prosperous people. Mostly engaged in trade and commerce, they respect all religious traditions. Excavated from Multan, coin inscriptions of the sun god date back to 6th and 7th century. In their homes, one can find Bible, Gathas and Quran all courteously placed side by side. Being credible and charitable people, they are much respected in Pakistan. They make excellent teachers, doctors, businessmen and above all peace-loving cosmopolitan citizens. Very few of us know that the famous Khandawala, Bhandara, Marker and Wadia – contributing immensely in the making of Karachi – all come from Parsi community. Who holds the courage to call them foreigners.

Rolling on the Silk Road, Islam approached Xian (China) in the 10th century. Reminiscent of the age, here stands the famous mosque Qin-Qing-Si. However, nothing inspired China more than Buddhism that got to Xian through Silk Road and then to all over China. Covering 2500 kilometers in 16 years on Silk Road, Xan Xang fetched back hundreds of Buddhist scriptures on horsebacks from 13th century India to write on his famous exegesis – now recognized as national treasure. Stories of the age and time abound from Swat and Bamyan to Sichuan.

Afghanistan has been having thriving towns and booming economies – all with the blessings of Silk Road. Number of towns like Herat, Kundus, Bukhara and Mazar Sharif still maintain their diversity and lively attitude. Unseen amidst the vapours of war and terrorism, the said towns reflect plurality and joie-de-vivre where men and women enjoy a relative calm and freedom of expression. Every Thursday in Herat, the night lights up with celebrated poets and story tellers, singing poetry and telling stories of all times and ages. To multiply their pleasures, scrumptious food is served to all those flocking to the event. The striking Persian imageries make one feel being in Isfahan. Despite fire and fury abound, the tint and colours of the towns still echo through their citadels and sensibilities. For the soul never dies.

Minuscule in number, Sikh and Hindus also live in Afghanistan. Zablon Simintove is 'the only Jew' – a carpet-trader and care-taker of the only synagogue left in Herat. With his death Afghanistan will lose a vital chunk of history. His legacy needs to be preserved and multiplied. Masal, the only Japanese woman making Bamyan her home, runs the famous 'Hotel Silk Road' there. Arriving as a journalist here in 1980s, she fell in love with Bamyan and a Panjsheri man. Now, she is the exclusive Tsuchi Chef in the land. 'I am romantically in love with Afghanistan', she proudly expresses.

To our surprise, Maulana Rumi - the greatest of all mystic poets in Islam - was also born and received his early instructions at Balkh in the 12th century Afghanistan before he moved to Konya. It is the right place to quote a couple of his couplets here:

"Dance, when you're broken open. Dance, if you've torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you're perfectly free."

"Stop acting so small. You are the universe in ecstatic motion".

"Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."

He offers a pertinent hope too: "Where there is ruin, there is hope for a treasure."

In the foothills of Hindukush in Pakistan, survive the polytheistic Kalasha in Bomborit, Rumbir and Birir valleys. Believing in Greek gods and claiming their descent from Alexander's entourage, their distinctive beliefs and festivals are admired all over the world. With several missing and mingled links with the Spartan and Athenian gods and goddesses, Kalasha form a unique stock of people on earth. Once again, it was the Silk Route that lured Alexander to approach the end-of-earth, which he believed lies across the Hindukush and legendary Indus. Across Indus, gods, if not Greeks, did fly to make Himalaya their home. It will never stop fascinating chivalry all over the world.

In the southwest of Himalaya, once prospered the Gandhara civilization in Swat, Taxila, Takhtbai and Peshawar. Historically, its craft and creativity influenced the entire Buddhist civilization. Gandhara is the art of inscribing hymns and stories about Gautama in stone. From the 1st to the 5th Century CE, the place saw its glorious kingdom under Kushan Dynasty. For early five-hundred-years almost, it has been attracting Buddhist pilgrims from as far as China and Far East. Interestingly, all over the subcontinent, the largest Buddhist community lived in East and West Pakistan till 1971. 'Built upon the sacred crumbs of Buddha's body, four of the holiest stupas stand in Gandhara till today,' as narrates Hsuan Tsang.

Innumerable monuments, temples, monasteries and Buddha sculptures have been discovered in these valleys. Buddhist monks from north and southeast yearn to visit the venerated venue – should the Government of Pakistan know the value of sanctity for ‘others’ or should the Gautama himself revisit Gandhara. Deserted temples are longing for their devotees – young and old.

As promised by the world’s conscience, the twin Buddha statues, await to stand tall again in their golden chambers along with the hundreds of cave monasteries to tell the tale of all-embracing Afghan past. Having had lost the benevolent Buddhas, Bamyan has lost the watchful ‘Buddha eyes’ gazing and gracing the pilgrims for centuries. The place reflects a blend of Chinese, Uzbek, Greek and Indian values and cultures. No surprise that Bamyan Buddhas resemble the 4th century Chinese Buddhas of Bing-Ling-Sue.

Bamyan was an important stop-over before the Silk Route caravans entered the Chinese desert of Taklimakan – that unbelievably sizzles in the day and goes freezing in the night. On their way back, the traders would stay and pray here for their safe passage through the horrific terrain ahead of Karakoram. On the other hand wives and women in Xian would intone poetry and perform rituals with willow branches at the Yellow River for those taking to the mysterious journey. Ancient poetry reflects the pain of parting and pleasure of union with those leaving for the lands unknown.

*In the words of Wan Weyn: “The travelers’ willows, tokens of fresh and green, by offering you a twist for
you are departing towards the setting sun.
Soon you will be part of the past”.*

Reflecting Greek and Chinese art, the oasis town of Dunhuang situates besides the Crescent Lake in Taklimakan’s wasteland. It literally preserves thousands of Buddha sculptures in cave-chambers and shining murals that Silk Route travelers would commission in their own names.

Buddhism, as did Islam and Christianity, changed while ensembling with the cultures and lifestyles of the local genera. Certain religions retreated from certain places while others filled in the space. Hence while, with the advent of Islam in the 7th century and its spread from Central Asia to the Tarim Basin in China, Buddhism began to wane down in Afghanistan. Islam is now part and parcel of people’s lives here and in Pakistan. What need to be recalled and rejuvenated is the mystically plural norms merged with those

different from their own. What needs to be revoked is the goddess of love and harmony to disassemble the armies of hatred and hostility.

Sadly, the ancient Silk Route is disappearing to the dust of dams and dusk of time, settlements and highways. But a new one - replacing camels and horses with railroads - is already coming-up and evolving to play the same role. Afghanistan and Pakistan hold tremendous potential of becoming a hub of cultural, ideological and economic exchange. One such romantic and evocative expedition has already hit London leaving from Yiwu – far cleaner and greener than other means of travel. Hope it proves a corner stone of peaceful relations between Pakistan, Afghanistan and other neighboring countries. The new Silk Road can effectively transcend the tales of past and present for a better future.
