

13 Islamabad

In the northern winter of 2006, I embarked on an adventure to Pakistan. My good friend Dr Abdul Khan had urged, and arranged with his network at Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) for me to have a 3-month stint there as a Visiting Professor.

I had first come across Abdul (seems strangely worded) in 1990, but at the time when I first saw him, I was not introduced, and we did not speak. I had been flown in From Perth to Sydney to attend an interview at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur (UWS) for the position of Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Business and Technology⁹. When I came out of the interview, he was sitting outside the room ready to be interviewed next. Little did I know then that we were to become very good friends after I joined UWS (he was already on staff before my taking up my position). We never spoke of the time we crossed paths at the interview. For us scientists, we might say that we have reached a pinnacle of our career if we manage to get published in the scientific journal *Nature*. I never have and never will, but my good friend Abdul has (from one of his findings from his PhD work at the University of Sydney). Thus, I can say the next best thing - that for all my career at UWS, my office was next to someone who had published in *Nature*.

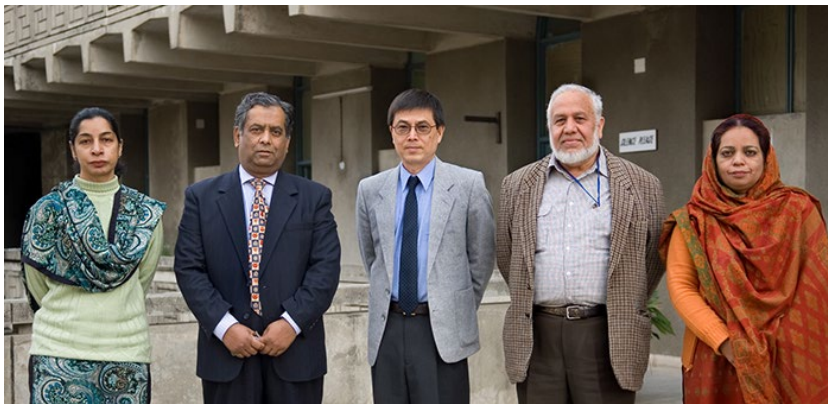
At Islamabad, Abdul had found a lodging house for me to stay showed me how to do the basics of local shopping for essentials, and introduced me to the staff at the Department of Biological Sciences at QAU which was going to be my academic home for 3 months. Then, Abdul left to go back to Sydney for a month. I really felt quite alone in a strange city. But, it was yet another piece of training in the face of adversity to make good of what was there. I soon felt much safer and more relaxed in an exotic place where underneath the surface was restrained violence and petty crime. Strangely, for someone who was brought up as a Catholic Christian, I found the call to prayers by the muezzins at the many mosques around the city and near my lodgings to be reassuring because the calls reminded me of Malaysia where I grew up. There were so many mosques near each other each with their loudspeakers that because of slightly different timings of their clocks to which their prayers

⁹ This faculty was the only one of its kind ever in an Australian university. The basis for its inception was the vision of foundation Dean, Prof. Bill Vagg that Australia can improve its position in the world if it is able to translate more of its demonstrated scientific and technological capabilities into earning export income. He reasoned that one of the impediments to better translation is the poor understanding and interaction between the business and technological worlds in Australia. The Faculty of Business & Technology was a purposeful home for the bringing together of minds from the two disparate spheres to produce business and technology literate graduates who would be immersed in generic, business and technological knowledge (the streams were biotechnology, manufacturing, and instrumentation & control). Alas, the staff most of whom were recruited from academically pure rather than applied or integrated backgrounds, gradually forced the faculty to be split along its natural seam after some ten years in existence. The intent of the faculty theme could have made a difference in Australia but we shall never know.

were calibrated, the calls were very often out of phase with one another, and it could sound cacophonous.

Islamabad is an interesting place. It is, like Canberra, Washington, D.C., Brasilia (see “Last mango in São Paulo”), and Putrajaya, a planned and designed capital city. What one sees is the old and the modern juxtapositioned. It is designed in a grid-pattern and so it is relatively easier to navigate around than say Canberra which has a circular pattern centred around Parliament House. During my stay I would either walk or take one of those many small black and yellow taxis (Suzuki *Mehran*). It was a bit annoying that when one walks around in the city, taxis would invariably toot at you to attract one’s attention in the hope of getting one’s custom.

Quaid-i-Azam University self-described on its webpage as “the premier seat of learning in Pakistan, known for its research and excellence in teaching.” It is considered to be the



Microbiologists at QAU; L-R: Dr Fariha, Prof. Abdul Hameed, Prof. Clem Kuek; Prof. Abdul Khan, Dr Safia

national university of Pakistan. The university is located at the foothills behind the Parliament House. A small group of academics and I would be picked up by a university van from various locations to be delivered to and from the university each day (working hours are 9

a.m. to 3 p.m.). QAU has more female than male postgraduate students. I was told that the reason for this is that male students leave to take employment upon graduation



My Environmental Biotechnology postgraduates on poster day

whereas the females are more likely to enhance their qualifications with postgraduate studies in order to be able to attract a better class of potential husbands (one wonders how this might be sustainable when the sum effect in the long term would be that male graduates would tend to be less qualified than their wives).

I spent my three months at QAU guest lecturing and helping Prof. Abdul Hameed¹⁰ to design a pilot plant using my experience in conceptualizing and implementing the bioprocessing section of the Moot Manufacturing Facility at the University of Western Sydney. We were hoping that the proposed facility at QAU would be adopted as the National Pilot Plant Centre of Pakistan. The funding for this proposal was rumoured to derive from the US which was providing a lot of cash aid to Pakistan in exchange for their supposed support in the fight against the evil forces across the frontier to the north of the country. Prof. Hameed and I sought and obtained the approval and support of the Vice Chancellor of QAU during a meeting with him. But, as it turned out, things did not reach any further than the concept (drawing) stage because life in Islamabad was hotting up as I entered discussions with various parties to advance the plans for the pilot plant¹¹.

Hameed Ji and I had arranged to have a dinner meeting at the Islamabad Marriott Hotel with the Pakistan representative of the European bioreactor equipment manufacturer from which we could procure some of the equipment for our proposed Pilot Plant Centre. In the afternoon of the day we were to meet (26 January 2007), a suicide bomber had got into the compound of the hotel and detonated his bomb which killed a hotel guard, the bomber and caused five others to be injured. We relocated our meeting to another hotel and held it quickly and apprehensively that night. This was a sign that the surface calm in Islamabad was ready to be rippled. I was rather anxious for my time in the city to end and looked forward to return home and subsequent events which unfolded showed the timing of my leaving to be good. Unfortunately, those who live in the city had to take it in their stride and I felt for them who I left behind. After all, this was the city that Abdul had warned me when I first arrived, not to be outside mosques at Friday prayer times because the different Muslim factions had the habit of settling scores by setting off bombs at the places of worship of their disliked brethren. I used to walk quickly by whenever I had to pass a mosque (one would encounter many in this city). I left at the start of February 2007. A few days after I left, an attack at the international airport from whence I departed, injured five people after the attacker successfully detonated his bomb. Later, in July, government forces besieged Islamic fundamentalists holed up the Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) near the Aabpara Markets where I had once done my fresh marketing. Ninety-five people were

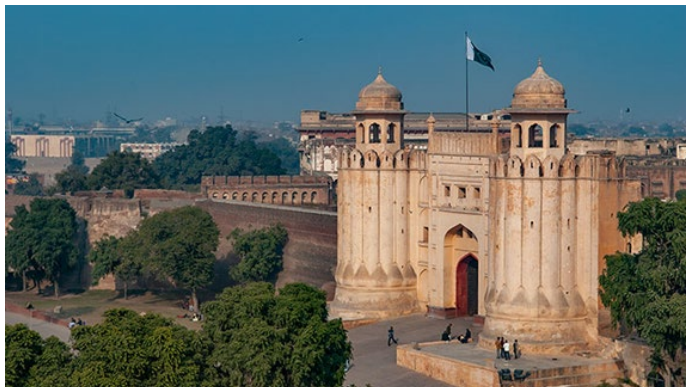
¹⁰ Hameed Ji as I was allowed to call him (“Ji” means brother), cut a kindly if not imposing figure amongst the staff and students at his faculty at QAU. Apart from Abdul, Hameed Ji and his family looked after me during my stay, taking me for several of Islamabad’s famous hold-over from the British Raj – the afternoon High Tea; trips to the country-side such as ancient Taxila, and the hill stations of Muree, Ayubia and Bhurban. Sadly, COVID-19 was to take the life of Hameed Ji in 2021. His family’s loss is shared by many.

¹¹ Later commencing 2015, I was involved in leading the establishment of a MYR60 million pilot plant facility in Miri, Sarawak which was completed in 2019.

killed. While the January Marriott suicide bombing did little damage to the hotel, a second attempt in September burnt down a section of the hotel when a dumper truck laden with explosives was exploded in front of the hotel, killing fifty four people. The tension did not abate even four years later during the debate about blasphemy when the Governor of Punjab who was in favour of liberalising the laws on the matter was assassinated by his own guard at the car park of Kohsar market where once I shopped.

Unless one is well-steeped in an understanding of the impact of cultural Islam (in its various forms), of tribalism and blood feuds, it is not easy to reconcile what I say are people just like you and me when everything else is shed, with an “old testament” basis for ethos. We all use our hands for the most gratifying (eating) and the most humble of activities (ablution) although some use tools for eating and some choose one hand over the other for ablution duty. Regardless, it brings home the sense of being in the land where time has made no impact and yet our eyes see modernity every which way we look.

I refer to the time when Abdul and his wife Maryea insisted that I go with them to visit the ancient city of Lahore which was where their families came from. I am very glad that they took me there to see ancient India (there was only one country before partition in 1947 which gave rise to India and Pakistan as two independent countries). But, on the day we were due to catch our long-haul bus back to Islamabad, we were caught in a long traffic jam in a taxi. We slowly inched our way forward over what seemed a very long time until we were alongside the courthouse when news reached the taxi from bystanders that the jam was caused by the aftermath of the machine-gunning of a family who had arrived at the court to have a family matter adjudicated. Members of the opposing family had decided to settle the matter by lead projectiles. This is what in many cultures is referred to as a blood feud.



Alamgiri Gate at Lahore Fort built by the Mughal shahs

The comical and the deadly also juxtapose in Lahore. I remember a ride in a motorcycle rickshaw in that city when even if I had a severe case of constipation, I would have been guaranteed an involuntary bowel movement or two during that ride. The driver weaved in and out between all manner of vehicles from big trucks, to other rickshaws to animal-drawn carts, and of course people. But, I do not know why I bothered to be afraid because these people drive like this for a living. In between the manic driving, speaking in Punjabi, the driver had asked Abdul seated next to me looking more European than Pakistani if judged by the colour of his face, "From where does the young boy with you come from?" I guess I should be pleased for I was already 52 years of age at the time.



In a Lahore motor rickshaw hemmed in by a bullock cart on the left, a rickshaw in front and another on the right

The countries of Pakistan and India arose from much tragedy in the state of Punjab during partition. The Punjab is a good place to illustrate the effect of Mughal rule in India on its contemporary polity. The state was split with the Muslim areas going to Pakistan and the Hindu areas to India. Thousands of Muslims and Hindus fled the "wrong" side of the border to be in the country which they believe would be their destiny by religion. Thousands were massacred as they made those crossings between the two countries during partition. The two countries have been at war with each other several times since 1947 over unresolved matters of where the border should be (mainly in the Kashmir where the will of the people and of its ruler were sufficiently obfuscated for both sides to be able to claim to be right). Yet, every day at several official border crossings between Pakistan and India, notably at Wagha, a world-famous flag lowering ceremony is held every evening. Here, both Pakistani and Indian border guards with much spit and polish perform their choreographed exaggerated marching and exchange fearsome glares at the opposing guards. This choreography looks comical to all but the locals who take it very seriously, but this theatre hides my treatise that beneath all



With a Pakistan Ranger at Wagha. They are chosen for their height so as not to be lesser than the Indian guards on the other side of the border gate.

this on the surface lies much tragedy and the potential for violence to boil over.

All in all, I would not trade my time in Islamabad for anything. I am glad to have met the people there and shared their lives for a brief moment. *Shukria*, Abdul for the experience.