



# Khairpur with Yasmeen Aapa

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At the Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai University Botanical Garden - Q Gardens of Pakistan

## Two memorable days in Sindh

A PIA ATR42 machine takes us from Karachi to Sukkur. Low altitude turbulent flight brings us in about 55 minutes. We walk out of the aircraft but wait nearby till my trolley is handed over to me. Later on we wait for almost 20 minutes to receive Aapa's checked-in bag at the belt. We joke about the delay. Perhaps it would have been faster if we just picked our bags from the plane's cargo and walked to the terminal. Airport has not changed since I last visited the area in 2002. As a matter of fact, it hasn't change much since 1984-1985 when I flew quite

often from Sukkur to Karachi and back. She is irritated but her face is calm. She calls her assistant Naeem to know if the car would be waiting outside. We ask a porter to load our bags on a trolley and walk out. Someone in a Sindhi cap, shalwar qameez and a windbreaker is looking at us expectedly. Yes the car is there. We drive off. As usual, her brain is working fast. A few telephone calls and checks. Then suddenly she asks me, "would you like to stop by at the Sukker barrage ?". "I wanted to visit the site since long", she says. I nod and the

driver is asked to take us there. We need to go to a place where old maps are stored. We don't know where. The driver stops at a building and we jump out. It is the engineer's office and two clerks are surprised at this unexpected visit. They are seated in a large rustic hall with a few old desks and sideboards. The atmosphere is heavy but friendly. A tint of curiosity is in the air. They have never seen her but probably guess who she can be. She asks for old maps. Really old ones going back to the time when the barrage was built.



with Mr. Abbas Baloach



Aapa on the bund (dam)



"kuchha" area - the poor's land



# If we continue with projects of this nature, soon poors of Pakistan can get rid of their poverty and dependence on others !

The clerk point out towards a stack on one of the side boards. She pulls the stack, and examines it carefully. Yes these are valuable maps but there must be some more. Questions are asked about the archiving and preservation. No they are the originals and once an executive engineer started to scan them. Now he is posted in Nawabshah and should know where the scans might be. We thank the clerks and then she remembers, "lets try to see the museum and the library as well". So we find our way to the library and the museum next door. "The British always did a thorough job", she remarks. "I have to come down again. We must preserve these documents and photographs", her detrmind voice ends our stop-over and we are now on our way to the Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai University guest house. On the way, I bring up the waterlogging issue caused by the Barrage making further excavations at Moenjodaro impossible. She agrees. We have to have a master plan. After all, similar problems were sorted out in Egypt and elsewhere. We

Ours is a very strong homeland. its like a lion that has been mentally programmed to believe that it is a cat!

discuss the Date-Plantations of Khairpur They are too sweet, quite a few of them get worms before ripening. What can be done. I have some ideas and she listens carefully. "Aapa, have you looked at Khairpur palaces and their conservation", I ask. "Yes, but the Mirs have no liquidity now". Government must intervene. "I have compiled a list of all palaces and important buildings. Young bureaucrats are taking interest", she says. "The DC of Khairpur Mr. Abbas Baloach has been very friendly and takes a lot of interest in these matters", she says. "We will meet him but today the Chief Minister is here and he is very busy with him". It turns out that Khairpur had ethnic tensions recently and Mr. Quaim Ali Shah (the CM of Sind) who happens to be from Khairpur as well, was in town. We check-in at the University's spacious guest house. The attendant is waiting and is keen to serve us tea. We take a short break to freshen up in our rooms. Rooms are good but the December cold of northern Sindh makes them un-cosy. I open up my trolley and pull out my Jack Wolfskin Fleece. Toilets are good too but the WC is the traditional squatty potty. "Oh my God, how will I manage that", I keep saying to myself. As it turns out, there were electrical heaters placed in our rooms but I somehow miss mine and settle myself in a cold room.

Darya Khan Shaikh



Me and aapa at DKS



Active villagers



A place for women to meet



Water pump





# Planting Moringa trees on river banks would stop soil erosion and will be a great source of wholesome food and medicinal ingredients

We meet in an hour and enjoy the finest tea. "It is late now and we cannot go to Kuchha", she says, "but I will show you something remarkable". We walk out in the winter evening of Khairpur. The last rays of sun are spending their mellow warmth. We take a walk and reach a large garden. "This is the Q-Gardens of Pakistan", declares Aapa. They have made great efforts to plant a variety of trees. She wants to show me the Moringa tree so we make our way through muddy pathways. We try to avoid occasional silt but shoes are dirty anyways. "You know, in Southern Africa they call it the Baboon's Tree", I assert, "because when baboons are sick they climb up this tree and eat its leaves and branches". "I am looking at planting a lot of them along the river banks. They will check erosion of the soil", says Aapa as she noticeably admires the garden. We look at the nursery and

**People have picked up cleanliness and hygiene instantly. They make efforts to keep the village clean**

meet the head gardener before making our way to the guest house.

It is 31st December, the last day of 2011. Dinner is served at 8 PM and we chat a little before retiring to our rooms. What a place to spend the last day of the year. But I am constantly reminded of the privilege to be with this dynamic lady who undoubtedly has boundless energy and the will to change things, to help and make things better. She does it in her friendly but firm way. No detail is left unnoticed. Our conversation is versatile as we easily switch over from humanitarian projects to the heritage issues and a bit of family talk. I retire and get changed and in bed. I am going through the day I have spent. I have switched on a local news channel and reading the book "Pakistan: a hard country". "So here will be a silent new year's night, no gun fire so typical of most Pakistani cities, no Klashnikov bursts", It is now 10 PM and I am about to doze off as my cell phone rings. "Are you awake Sohail?". "The DC has just called. A car is on its way to pick us up".

## Kot Diji



Kot Diji Fort in Background



Examining the walls



From the rooftop



Heritage to come



## The dynamic DC of Khairpur is very interested and supportive to our projects.

I tell her that I will be ready. Jumping out of bed in the cold room of the December night, I rush to the shower and get ready. Soon I am with Aapa in her room and we wait for the DC's car. It shows up after an hour - the new year is almost there. A heavily guarded Toyota SUV races us to the DC house and we are asked to wait in the drawing room. A servant switches the electrical heater on and the tea is served. No sign of Abbas Baloach as we wait for the next half an hour. Signs of uneasiness are obvious on Aapa's face. She pulls out her cellphone and calls. "We are here, where are you?". He shows up and apologizes. "I am having a terrible time right now". "In my office the delegation of SS is to be negotiated and subsequently other delegations of various ethnic parties will come". It is a sensitive manner - a few days back ethnic violence has erupted. A murder has taken place. Things may go out of control. Mr. Abbas is a friendly and intelligent person with shining eyes. He is also a man of action who moves things fast. His expression is earnest as he listens to Aapa and answers her. Obviously he has great respect for Aapa.

He insists that next morning we should have the breakfast together. Aapa is keen to have furniture for the Heritage Office at Kot Diji. So just before the year 2011 ends, a working session begins. The Government has kindly agreed to convert the newly built Kot Diji Guest House to the Heritage's Office. People have been hired and they will commence their work from 2nd January. Captain Azhar (the Assistant DC) is called in. Aapa repeats her list that he diligently notes down. Tables, Chairs, Cupboards, Computers, Printers ... Azhar repeats after her. "Yes Mam, I will arrange these". "You have to hurry up", says she. "We have people on

2nd and I must be able to seat them and give them work".

Our new year celebration takes place in a heavily guarded SUV that brings us back to the University Guest House. I wish her a happy new year and come to my room, set my alarm and soon fast asleep.

Next morning our car takes us to the DC residence. As we are guessing which door to knock, Abbas Baloach appears from behind us in a jogging outfit. He must have been jogging. He takes us in and tells me that I need to be nourished well for the day as I am accompanying Aapa. "You will be walking and climbing, with her so I must provide you enough energy", he grins. The typical Sindhi breakfast, rich wholesome and exquisite is served. Azhar is also called in. Again it is a breakfast-working session. Abbas double checks Aapa's requirements, instructs Azhar for some details and takes upon himself to look in to other items on Aapa's list. It is agreed that after visiting Kuchha area (the village), we will meet up with the ADC at Kot Diji Guest House.

We drive towards Kuchha. The driver has never been to Darya Khan Shaikh before. So he misses out the proper turning. Naeem is called. He instructs the driver again. No we are wrong again. Aapa is not pleased. She does not like the fact that the car rental company has not done its homework. Finally someone at the village is called. He instructs the driver and sets himself off to meet us at the dam. We finally make it. The driver is apologetic. "Sir this is a region of dacoits and I did not want to ask the people in detail else we jeopardize ourselves". Makes sense. Anyhow we are at the village Darya Khan Shaikh where the "Green Caravan Ghar" project was realized. The first sight is impressive. Bamboo, mud and

lime have been used in an effective and aesthetic manner. I know the details from Heritage Brochures. So my focus is on the general conditions and environment. I also want to know what people feel about Heritage's initiatives. It is not common in Pakistani (and specially outside Punjab) villages for women to come together. Whereas men can meet at Chopals and other places and spend their time, women do not have a community center or a meeting place. Darya Khan Shaikh has a women's meeting point erected on bamboo platform. The School is also on a high ground. Flood now will not displace them. They can save their belongings on the upper floors. They can save themselves by simply climbing the roof top of their newly built homes. I get a tidy and orderly impression. People are confident and children happy. Women seem self-assured. **The Yameen magic has worked here as well.** The water filter has noticeably reduced the diseases they tell me. We are talking about drying the fish and selling it to the market. I can see that this village is destined to prosper. People are concerned about their children's education. The school master is spearheading the awareness. Lunch is served. Immaculate and clean, proper in all forms and wholesome. Although Abbas forced us in to a huge breakfast, I cannot help but to enjoy what these villagers have to offer. Different dishes have come from different houses they tell me. I look at Aapa and she at me. We both are obviously pleased and happy. It is her life's work and I had been a modest helper. This is my Pakistan. This is her Pakistan.



## I want the development in the region to be “infectious”

I don't want to leave but I have only this day. So we take a stroll through the village. My mind is occupied. While observing the “rillies” displayed ( and Aapa wants to see a kind of show-room for the local craft in every village) by women and girls, my mind is racing. How can such villages be made energy independent? How can these people be made lot more prosperous? How we can tame the sun to serve us here? I have many ideas and I am making mental notes. Above all, my mind is busy to come up with a model to replicate Aapas' experiments on a scaled up manner. She needs a strong lobby! Her time is too precious. She is involved in the nitty-gritty. She should develop concepts and teams should take over. The villagers should become the carrier of this development. They should take up the task of bringing the message to their neighbours. We can obviously act as catalysts but no more...

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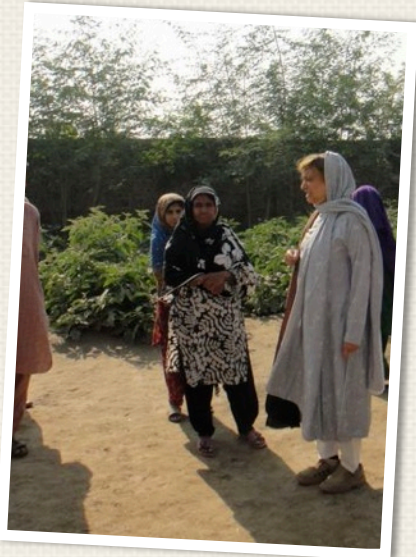
### To Kot Diji

We finally leave Darya Khan Shaikh and our destination is Kot Diji, more precisely the Guest House near the Fort. We reach there. The contractor is still busy with last details. Some University kids are in the main hall. They are inquisitive. Who are we, they ask and would gladly like to leave. No we don't want that. We look at the building. Several rooms, a verandah and a large court yard. Yes it can be a meaningful Heritage Center. We climb up the roof. “These buildings should be made away from the historical sites”, she says, objecting to the nearness of the Guest House to the Fort. I agree.



### Rilly

It's a traditional bed sheet craft by Sindhi women according to their thousand years old traditional way. These patterns can be made for other objects as well. The Heritage Foundation is keen to promote this craft for the betterment of local women.



### Women

Pakistan's leading architect and great propmoter of local heritage, Mrs. Yasmeen Lari (here with Sindhi ladies at DKS) is my Yasmeen Aapa. Aapa is a Urdu word reserved to respectfully address the elder sister.



### The Fort

The Kot Diji Fort, formally known as Fort Ahmadabad, dominates the town of Kot Diji in Khairpur District, Pakistan about 25 miles east of the Indus River at the edge of the Nara-Rajasthan Desert. The fort was built between 1785 to 1795 by Mir Sohrab Khan Talpur, founder of the Kingdom of Upper Sindh in 1783.

# GREEN CARAVAN GHAR



## Heritage office at Kot Diji Guest House can revolutionize tourism in the region

### Khairpur Region

1. Historical and Beautiful
2. Rich Culture
3. Promising Agriculture
4. Exquisite Cuisine
5. Friendly People
6. Progressive Environment
7. Near Large Cities
8. Well Connected

Soon such things would become an eye sore as has happened elsewhere. We look at the magnificent view of the Fort and the mound where excavations were made. They are lying waste. Soon the good Captain shows up and orient Aapa on the arrangements. All seems well. So the employees can start tomorrow. She will come again. Now she wants to leave because I am short of time. We drive off. We have tea together and a quick recapitulation from my side.

My drive to Sukkur airport is uneventful. The driver is curious and wants to know about the "Madam". So I fill him up. "She is a saint", he asserts.

A quick check-in but a long wait in the Sukkur passenger lounge. Flight has been re-scheduled. I wait and wait in a

half lit hall. The plane will make a stop over at Moenjodaro they tell me. Aapa calls to make sure if everything went well. I assure her that I am safe and sound. I have to attend the wedding of my friend's son at Karachi. Parties in Karachi start late anyways. Today for a change I am glad that it is so because I will be landing quite late in Karachi.

The author is the executive vice president of the Swiss Pakistan Society and a keen supporter of the Heritage Foundation. The Society is cooperating with the Heritage Foundation since the great Earthquake of 2005 in many ways.