

*Jannat Barooay Zameen Ast* (if there was a heaven on earth—Mughal Emperor Jahngir) :

Muzaffarabad was the home base for my father's side of the family till first when my grandfather died in 1975 and then my uncle died in 1980. I spent most of my Eid holidays and many of my summer ones there. I remember swimming in the Jhelum , (Neelum was always too cold. The legend is that once a water buffalo fell into the Neelum river and died from hypothermia in three minutes.) climbing the formidable mountain Pir Chinassi and roaming around in Jalalabad gardens. We spent many an evening enjoying the fabulous view from my Uncle's terrace of Domel (where the two rivers meet) and the jagged 2000 foot drop of Lohar Gali . My mother just reminded me in a phone conversation that Muzaffarabad was the first place she had set up house after she married my father as he was posted as a medical officer in the military hospital there. I had for a long time hung a black and white picture of my father as a dashing major along with the hospital staff of 1957 in a prominent place in my house.

But most of all I remember the treacherous car ride to Muzaffarabad. There are two ways to get there--each way more winding and precarious than the other. You can come via Murree and Kohala from Islamabad or through Abbottabad-Batrasi-Garhi Habibullah-Lohar Gali. Earthquake or no earthquake, there was always the threat of landslide on the infamous Aliot bridge. On the Muzaffarabad Abbottabad route, there was this ominous road sign of how this army jawan had given up his life in trying to stop a car from falling down the mountain side. My father, of course, would stop the car next to it always to take a break scaring the living daylights out of us.

My mother and I went with Nafeesa, Aneesa and Mohi to Muzaffarabad two years ago and had a really nice time. We picnicked in Neelum valley including standing underneath a hundred foot waterfall on the banks of the river. We went sightseeing in the fort built during Mughal emperor Akber's time and admired the riverwalk so beautifully developed during the last few years. (Ifti, my cousin, who had tried his hand at just about every business venture you can think of, had also tried to open a snack bar in the fort. It never worked.) The sense of optimism there on perhaps peace finally returning to Kashmir and links being opened up between both sides was quite real. In fact, there was a real estate boom along the Srinagar road. Altaf, Ifti's younger brother and our comrade in arms in adventures in lizard hunting in the Kassi (the dry river bed) and the search for the perfect swimming spot in the Jhelum had returned to Muzaffarabad and was living happily with his wife and kids there.

But now, as Ghalib said about Delhi after 1857, *nagah woh anbooh raha na woh inbisat* . Both the roads to Muzaffarabad were completely impassable due to landslides after the quake . The Neelum river too has been completely blocked with all the debri. The hospital where my father and mother first lived together has been completely destroyed. The house next to my uncle's house was razed to the ground as well. The neighbour is dead, along with his daughter in law and his granddaughter. Zaheer, the young man who lived a short walk down the mountain from his house, lost his wife and daughter. I remember meeting the little girl in my last trip there. My other uncle's father in law had built a house in a large compound along the banks of the Jhelum . The latest news was

that his brother in law who was visiting from Islamabad died when part of that compound collapsed. Altaf's house is completely destroyed but as miracle had it, he and his family survived. I hate to call Pakistan because every phone call results in the news of a loss of another person. laazim tha kay dekho mera rasta koi din aur!

The earthquake has probably not spared saeein saheeli sarkar, the ziarat of this small time mystic saint situated on the roadside just as we entered Muzaffarabad. My mother who was very much against paying homage to saints always discouraged us from going there. But we as children were always fascinated by the flags and the mystery that surrounded the place. The ziarat has always been the refuge for people who were down and out, in particular for one Sufi Mohammad Ali. When my brother was a child, Sufi was his dedicated personal caretaker. Sufi was spending all his retirement days hanging out at the ziarat entranced in his own world. Years after we had all left Muzaffarabad, a conversation with my cousins reached an awkward pause, when I asked with no particular prompting whether Sufi was still alive. Nobody seemed to know.

As I watch people on TV and the internet talking about Kashmir and the need for providing shelter to tens of thousands of people, my mind keeps going back to Sufi and saeein saheeli sarkar--dar soor noha khwan wa bazm-e-azaa ba raqs!