

## MEMOIRS

---

# Karakoram Highway: Reflections From Heart And History

---

**Asma Amanullah Khan\***

*[Asma Amanullah Khan specializes in International Relations. She is the daughter of Mr. Amanullah Khan who passed away last year. He was the founder Chairman of Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, (JKLF) struggling to establish an Independent State of Jammu and Kashmir state as it existed before 1947 when it was attacked by the tribal raiders from Pakistan which resulted in bifurcation of the state in two parts. Later, Pakistan further bifurcated the part of Kashmir under its occupation.*

*Asma Amanullah, apart from paying an emotional tribute to her departed father who was buried in Gilgit in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, provides a fascinating account of habitat and environs of Karakoram Highway which was historically and politically a part of Jammu and Kashmir state. This narrative provides significant historical and anthropological glimpses of the region. Ed.]*

### **A Homage**

To commemorate the second anniversary of my father's passing away, I wanted to go beyond simply writing an Ode to him, which partially this is but also introduce the region of his birth and origin in all its splendour and magnificence to another region he so passionately devoted his life and its pursuits to. I view this exercise as an extension of

my father's legacy and his vision of unification of the erstwhile state of Jammu Kashmir (Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan) even if not physically but symbolically and emotionally. I hope this labour of love is able to provide a primary interface between the regions and their long-neglected relationships, while also offering an opportunity to map their historical, civilizational and human linkages. But above all I hope it contributes

*\*Asma Amanullah Khan is an academic and specializes in International Relations and is based in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir.*

towards the rekindling of the regions fraternal bonds and that of a shared identity, both past and present.

It was the longest night of my life, listless I lay there as snapshots from my childhood flashed across my mind. His youthful, smiling face from our time in the UK kept echoing back, by far my most cherished memory of him, even if it all now seemed a distant past, a surreal vision. It was probably how I wished to preserve him in my mind, my memory and as my 'idea' of him. To think of it I didn't really have many memories with him, mostly away, travelling or confined to the four walls of his office, there wasn't much time I got to spend with him. But what little I did was to leave a deep imprint on the person I would eventually go on to become, the choices I would be informed to make and the ideals I would learn to value. Looking back, I now realise how important it is to have a towering titan of a person, at least in the child's mind, as a parent, mentor, guide – or all rolled into one as in my case. How empowering an experience and enabling a precedent for a child, to be provided a template to navigate the crests and troughs life alternates, yet emerge triumphant and redeemed, at peace with oneself and the journey one took.

My tears had dried up - that's not how I wanted to remember my father, mourn him, nay his life was a celebration, but also because that's how I had always seen him, calm, composed and collected. I knew that's exactly what he would've expected of me - dignified in my darkest hour. The truth is I was too blindsided to process anything. As everything around me seemed to crumble I found refuge in my childhood. The beaming smile, his endearing touch and those lit up eyes as he engaged me both in mundane small talk or the more enlightened lessons of life's greater truths. I would cherish those fleeting moments, the sense of respect, confidence and parity he would imbue, the need to question, rise and commit he'd impart. Nothing could be more inspiring or reassuring than a sense of purpose and destiny, the desire to be part of something greater, more sacrosanct and far beyond just one's self. The compass it provided, the spark it ignited. He enabled it all and much more.

His body finally arrived from the Morgue. I didn't want to go see him. This wasn't going to be my final memory of him. As everyone wailed, rued and pushed to have the last deedar (to view in reverence), I calmly waited at the back, reciting

Quranic verses instead – something I believed more powerful and assuring in making this last journey easier for him, whilst also keeping alive my faith in him - his struggles, his dreams and of course my own self. As I finally got up to go to him I felt a part of me break as if my heart had splintered into a million brittle shards. There he lay peaceful and tranquil, as if in deep sleep. His gentle smile still adorning his face and the signature calm writ large. That's exactly how I had known him in his lifetime and how now I would be seeing him off – nothing could've come more full circle. Having declined the government offer to transport him in the official chopper – that would've belied everything he ever stood for - his life-time of struggles, sacrifices and tribulations; we soon set off by road along the Karakoram Highway (KKH) towards Gilgit, his self-identified place of final resting place. Even his final journey reflected the arduous path he had chosen for himself, while also the splendour it had imbued, just like the mighty Karakorums that framed the highway given its name, as it snaked across mainland Pakistan into Gilgit-Baltistan.

As we headed northwards onto the Great Trunk Road from the garrison city of Rawalpindi, my father's base since 1988, I set off retracing his

footprints. From a remote village in the Astore district of Gilgit Baltistan (GB) my father had come a long way, conceiving and formulating his vision of an Independent state of Jammu Kashmir modelled on the principles of “pluralism, secularism and constitutional democracy”, his ideology “Free Kashmir” had fired the imagination of an entire generation of Kashmiris, founding one of the most formidable political organisations of its time - the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which would go on to pioneer the movement for the right of self-determination in the Kashmir Valley while simultaneously continuing to raise the issue on diplomatic fronts across important western capitals where he had meticulously founded units of JKLF, traveling half way across the globe in pursuit of disseminating his ideology, in search of allies and aides as he led protests, organised demonstrations, mobilised membership drives, attended and disrupted UN General Assembly sessions raising pro-Kashmir slogans, addressed Press conferences at UN Headquarters in New York, London and as guest speaker at the prestigious National Press Club in Washington DC, wrote books – his ‘Free Kashmir’ can be found in the glossary of every significant International book on Kashmir, produced, edited, distributed a huge

body of revolutionary literature, made International headlines attracting attention to his cause – attempted crossing the ceasefire line in 1992. He faced incarcerations, endured torture, abided deportations, defied powers, daunted isolation, braved stigma as a political “untouchable” – the price of being a “nationalist” Kashmiri having a mind and vision of his own – he lead an unconventionally fulfilling life, dictated by his own terms and committed to his own will.

### **Taxila Junction**

My chain of thoughts faced a rude shock as the vehicle we were travelling in took a huge leap as the driver tried negotiating an unexpected speed-breaker. Back on the road, stabilised, I took a look around to make out that we had reached Taxila, once a pivotal junction (and remain a reference point on Jammu and Kashmir Heritage) on the ancient trade route between the Indian Sub-continent and Central Asia. It had remained a celebrated seat of learning for both Buddhist and Hindu traditions producing the likes of Chanakya better known as Kautilya, who went on to author the ancient Indian treatise on statecraft - “Arthashastra”. It also emerged as a significant provincial seat of power

for the Mauryan Emperor Asoka, who facilitated its rise as a Buddhist centre of learning. The ruins at Taxila date back to approximately 3500 BCE and also include artefacts belonging to the Harrappan civilisation of 2900 BCE. Owing to its strategic location Taxilla had been a much vied for region hence part of various regional empires such as the powerful Persian Achaemenian Empire, The Gandharan kingdom, Hellenistic Greco-Bactrians, Yuezhi Kushans’ and the Indian Mauryan and Gupta Empires. Run over by the Central Asian Hephthalites (Huns) in the 5th century CE the city faced decline, to be termed as desolate and “half ruined” by the visiting Chinese Monk Xuanzang by 630 CE. Designated a UNESCO world Heritage site in 1980, references to it can be found in various historical accounts such as by Pliny the Elder, The Chinese Monks Faxian and Xuangzang, Persian scholar Al Beiruni and the more traditional Indian sources of Vedic texts, Buddhist Jatakas and Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

### **Gilgit – Baltistan: Rekindling old bonds**

As we proceeded onwards I picked up my thread of thoughts and reflected upon my father’s demise and how even in this he had sought

to instrumentalize it for the larger good of his cause. While many thought it prudent that he decide upon, what is known as “Azad Jammu Kashmir” (AJK), as his final resting place, he came up with a plan of his own - choosing Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) instead. His decision was guided not so much by the fact that he was a native of the place and a son of the soil but by the more calculated bid of binding together all three regions of the erstwhile state of Jammu & Kashmir, symbolically even if not ‘yet’ physically. Probably the only Kashmiri leader having roots, presence and following in all three divided regions of the Jammu & Kashmir state, he shunned personal grandeur – that many thought would accrue by burial in AJK and insisted on a Gilgit burial instead. This was to be his parting gift, the final stroke of a pioneering ideologue in the twilight of his life.

A Gilgit burial in his scheme of things would facilitate the mending of the deliberately ruptured relationship between the various regions of J&K especially the more acrimonious GB and AJK. His burial, he envisaged would provide an opportunity to rekindle old bonds, revive lost links and resuscitate a dwindling socio-political connect. The fact that his organisation was

strongest in AJK, his burial in GB would mean an increased traffic from the former to the latter, hence increased interaction and association between the two regions. A vision set into motion as hundreds of his followers essayed the treacherous – and then very decrepit Karakoram Highway fresh on the heels of incessant rainfall and landslides, to be a part of his last rites in Gilgit. In an emotionally charged environment, waving the JKLF and Independent Kashmir flags, singing patriotic Kashmiri songs, chanting slogans vowing the continuation of the mission, the procession progressed towards its destination riding on a determined sentiment of unification and ownership.

This set off alarm bells within the administration and there was a conscious design to scuttle any such development. This wasn’t the first time such panic was aroused. There had always existed anxiety regarding the nature of my father’s association and capabilities within GB. His hounding by the country’s elite intelligence agencies had premised not so much on his role and stance on J&K but more importantly on the possibility of mobilising a similar unrest against the iniquitous discrimination within GB, which would’ve proven devastating given

GB's strategic positioning for Pakistan. The initial goodwill of facilitating my father's burial procession soon evaporated, falling back on the regular persona non-grata playbook of intimidation and containment. There was a deliberate effort to thwart my father's first death anniversary commemoration in Gilgit city a year later, while also undermining the completion of his mausoleum with the help of the local clergy under the cover of Islamic doctrine – Ah! religion, the ubiquitous panacea for every challenge in the region.

We soon took a right turn at Hasanabdal, situated at the intersection of the Karakoram Highway and the M1. As part of the multi-billion-dollar China-Pakistan-Economic-corridor (CPEC) Hasanabdal will serve as the terminus point of the project's western alignment (route). From here the planned Hakla-Dera Ismail Khan Motorway will connect it with the southwestern routes of the project right up till Gwadar – the crowning glory of the project. Home to Gurdwara Panja Sahib, Hasanabdal is one of the holiest sites for the Sikh faith and a popular pilgrimage destination for Sikhs from across the region..

As we proceeded on a northward route having crossed over to the

Hazara Division of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, I continued to dwell upon the challenges confronting my father's aspirations. Sardar Attique Ahmed Khan, President of AJK based All Jammu & Kashmir Muslim Conference and former Prime Minister of AJK - the son of another widely revered politician, the former President Sardar Qayyum Khan graciously accompanied the funeral procession to Gilgit, his second trip to the region and first along the KKH. My brother-in-law, Bilal Ghani Lone, member of the Srinagar based Executive Council of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) also arrived in the region after much difficulty, whereas the local GB political leadership too participated in the last rites, including the Chief Minister who incidentally is of Kashmiri descent. This convergence of leadership not just from across the physical divide of the regions but across its political Fault-lines too, provided a nuanced interface between the divided entities and their varied ideologies. It provided a unique opportunity, probably the only of its kind since the dissolution of the erstwhile princely state, wherein not only did the people of the divided regions come together but also their political elite along with their diverse political ideas and affiliations, opening up a plethora of

possibilities and opportunity, more so as I continue to have deep linkages within both GB and J&K. The regions may not have yet come together as a single entity but they did so in a bond of unison and commonality that was marked by a heavy undertone of Kashmiri identification through their association with my father. Even in his death he made sure his cause trump everything else; buried in the heart of Gilgit City, it is a testimony to the historical and political rights of the region and the legitimacy of their demand as reflected in my father's ideology and its struggles.

We soon passed through the towns of Haripur and Haveliyan, crossing the KKH Project Headquarters at the latter, onwards to the picturesque hill station of Abbottabad. A popular tourist destination, it is known for its cool climes and breath-taking vicinity. It also houses the Pakistan Military Academy at Kakul. Of late it gained international recognition for harbouring the Al-Qaeda Leader Osama bin Laden who was taken out in a pre-dawn operation by US Navy Seals in May 2011. Just on its outskirts lie the old Buddhist settlement of Damkot, correctly known as Dharma-kot.

We continued driving as the highway twined through visibly

changing terrain. As the elevation rose so did the encompassing scenery, with the crisp spring sun dancing through the lattice of leaves and blossoms that swept the surroundings, a sweet scent of fruit and fresh earth hung in the air, mingled with the tangy aroma of the conifer cover blanketing the horizon till the eye could see. A soft breeze caressed my face as I rested my head on the window sill, the heat of the sunrays just enough to soothe my yet numb senses. The babbling brooks and excited children conjured a sense of life and zest as the sprawling mustard fields lent a burst of colour. My gaze set far into thin air, we entered the main artery towards Mansehra. Mansehra lies at the junction of roads. Along with the KKH that proceeds towards the upper Indus Valley to the north, another road winds eastward towards Kashmir and yet another to Kaghan Valley through the Babusar Pass into GB.

### **Edicts of Asoka – The great**

Just north to the Mansehra city lie the remains of the fourteen rock edicts of the Mauryan Emperor Asoka engraved in the middle of the third century BCE. Asoka was a great conqueror who came to regret the devastation caused by his military

campaigns and sought salvation through practice and espousal of non-violence as enunciated in the Buddhist faith. Etched on three granite boulders the edicts are a compilation of both administrative as well as moral guidelines. One of the 33 inscriptions of the Edicts of Asoka they are written in the Kharosthi script in the Gandharan Prakrit language. Though sheltered by canopy cover they have not been able to escape the ravages of time or weather. Emperor Asoka is not mentioned by his name on the edicts but rather by his titles of Devana Priya Priyadesi Raja – The King, beloved of Gods, of noble appearance”.

### **Homage to Abhisares, Kanishka**

As we moved on leaving Mansehra behind the Hazara hills smoothed out into the Hazara Plain. The region being reminiscent of King Abhisares, the astute king of the Abhisara tribe - present day Hazara and Kashmir, who offered resistance to the onslaught of Alexander the Great and his Army west of the River Indus. The road then proceeded to Shinkiari, a place which is at times associated with the Shina speaking Shin tribesman of GB. Modern research however doesn't substantiate the

claim. I recalled how during happier times we had made several trips to the region with friends and family to beat the summer heat of the Punjab plains. The road kept climbing till we approached the more levelled region of the Chattar plain, yet another popular tourist site. The respite however proved short-lived as the ascent soon commenced and the road wound upwards lined by Pine trees on both sides. The tingly spray from cascading waterfalls that intermittently dotted the landscape, lent a playful reprieve. Slowly the terrain began to change once again acquiring the more rugged characteristics of the Kohistani relief as the peaks became more high and daunting. By Taraaz no more homes at the upper reaches of the summits could be seen. Eventually we reached Battagram. Though we headed straight towards Besham and onwards along the KKH, but had we taken a right turn from the Battagram city centre towards Pishora on the Pemal Sharif road we would've encountered the first of a series of ruins of ancient Buddhist settlements, most of which have now been levelled as fields. According to Dr Ahmed Hassan Dani, the renowned Pakistani archaeologist who documented the exploration, trekking further on foot some caves can be witnessed on the sides of which lie remnants of old Buddhist

monasteries. Further ahead there is a long tunnel which is difficult to access but above it lies another cave which still houses some hunting scenes and Buddhist paintings. The work falls under two categories. The first on the left-hand side is drawn in white pigmentation depicting human figures in various positions relating to the medieval period. The other set of drawings is in red. It illustrates various structures of worship and both human and animal figures engaged in it. The Kharosthi inscription on it reads – Kanishka Maharaja Saviharo i.e. the monastery of Maharaja Kanishka (The great Kushana Emperor).

Dr Dani goes on to narrate how as they move on to descend the Kat Galai pass they come upon an opening which brings into view the spectacular sight of the Indus River at Thakot. On its right bank rises a steep hill facing the adjacent areas of Swat and Buner, atop of which protrudes a 2160m spur known as the PirSar. The PirSar's height and the ruins of an old Fort upon it have been the focus of extensive study by Sir Auriel Stein, the British archaeologist who has identified it as the "Rock of Aornos", the ancient site where Alexander the great lay his last siege widely acknowledged as the climax to his reputation as "the greatest

besieger in history". The siege took place in 326 BCE which established Alexander the Great's reputation of invincibility and cleared his way for the eventual annexation of Punjab to the Macedonian Empire.

### **Land of the rebels**

We however headed onwards on our journey towards Besham marking the halfway point to Gilgit along the KKH. It is also the first major town of Kohistan - the Yaghestan "Land of the Rebels" of yesteryears. It had acquired the name and reputation due to its fierce resistance to foreign occupation and is also perceived to denote the opposite of "Huqumut" – governance, order or imposition. For centuries it remained an outlier to the Persian empire remaining at its periphery but never quite a part of it, as did it elude the British Empire's expansion. As its name suggests Koh – mountain, Stan – place (Persian) – place of the mountains, it is where the three great mountain ranges, The Hindukush, Karakoram and Himalaya's meet. This unique convergence has led to a versatility of flora and fauna and it is home to one of the most unique species in the world including the snow leopard. Just south of Besham town, the River

Indus which till then follows a westbound trajectory takes a bend and plunges southwards. This point is also known as the Great Indus Gorge. According to Sir Auriel Stein, this was the point of a distressing crossing made by the Chinese monk Faxian during his voyage from China to India and documented in his accounts as a point in the Indus where "men had bored through the rock on suspended ladders". After descending the ladders Faxian is said to have crossed by a hanging rope bridge. Besham is also the point where the road to GB forks out into two directions, one being the KKH that we were taking and the other through Swat. The present-day Swat Road is a remnant of the old trade route that previously passed through the region, once a major centre of early Buddhist thought and part of the Gandhara Kingdom. Besides Buddhist era ruins remnants dating to the later Bronze age can also be found in the region especially in the Gorbund valley.

### **Bronze age remenants**

From Besham we cross Pattan onto Komilla. At Komilla rock carvings can be seen right at the riverside but unfortunately due to erosion they are not very clear, however certain distinctly Buddhist stylising can be

made out. Just ahead of Komilla opens up the Kandia Valley where some Bronze Age material was found. Earlier the Valley also lead to Swat across the Hindukush, a trek having been undertaken by Sir Auriel Stein too. From Komilla we proceed towards Dassu, the district headquarters of the now bifurcated Upper Kohistan district, crossing over to the eastern flank of River Indus. We slow down negotiating the various digging and blasting done as groundwork for the proposed Dassu Hydro Power project, a proposed project to generate 4320 MW of hydro power. As we continue, along with the topography there is a palpable change in the cultural and social ethos too, as it gets visibly conservative with women progressively disappearing from the public eye. Isolated and steeped in tribalism, these hill people follow a strict code of conduct entrenched in centuries old tradition and dogma.

Winding through Chokung and Seakote, much to our relief the road starts widening at Keygah. We soon pass through a small tunnel built by the Chinese at Ochan naala as signboards start appearing in Chinese alongside the regular Urdu and English script. To our surprise some signboards also include Russian text. We soon slow down due

to the work going on a crusher plant by the China Civil Engineering and Construction Company (CCECC), a regular sight as we would soon discover. Taking one of the many blind turns we just about miss collision with a speeding truck overflowing with a load full of walnuts from Gilgit headed to the Rawalpindi mandi – the central market-place for distribution of goods from GB across Pakistan. With the truck drivers often going without sleep for somewhere between 48 to 72 hours they are quite a hazard on an otherwise peaceful and crime free KKH. As we drive through Barseen passing the memorial commmoring those who lost their lives during its construction between 1966 – 78, I say a quiet prayer, my sense of loss yet fresh and overwhelming.

### **Shatial: A historical point**

Further ahead the Indus River snakes through myriad gorges, once one of the most difficult passages in the entire terrain. The surrounding peaks bask in the golden glow of the late afternoon. By Sazin the gorges cease and the topography opens into wider plains. The river too becomes sandy and grey. As the sun prepares to set, its crimson streaks stain the sky. About two miles ahead we reach Shatial. Here the Shatial bridge

diverges to the left, accessing two valleys, Darel on its right and Tangir on its left, collectively known as Darel-Tangir. Both Darel and Tangir are repositories of immense historical and archaeological significance. Not far from the bridge, close to the highway the first series of rock carvings appear. A hub of cross-cultural interface, Shatial was once an important crossing point across the River Indus and a place frequented by travellers, missionaries and traders alike. According to Karl Jettmar, the renowned Austrian Archaeologist and Prehistorian, it evolved as a leading regional trading centre bringing together merchants from Persia, Central Asia and the Chinese orient. However, it has been suggested that Sogdian Merchants, the premier traders of their time had been restricted from travelling further ahead, thus demarcating an International border of sorts at Shatial. Evidence to this metropolitanism can be found in the various scripts and stylising adopted in the engravings. The earliest records have been discovered to have been written in the Kharosthi script during the first century CE. Hundreds of other inscriptions written in the Sogdian language can be found, giving names of visitors from Samarqand, Badakhshan and China. A Chinese inscription poorly drawn on an isolated rock has also been

noted. Inscriptions from the Brahimi script emerge from the 5th century CE. Another rock provides a series of Khasa Kings names, suggesting that they once inhabited the region. Sometime in the mid third century BCE The Mauryan Emperor Asoka had to contend with the Khasa tribe, whether his activity extended to this part of the region is not known. The inscriptions are spread across various boulders depicting various styles, eras and content evidence to the fact that it was written over a prolong period of time. The engravings vary from human figures both holy and royal to horsemen, hunting scenes, names of visitors and a highly complex set of stupas'.

### **Darel valley**

Lining the river bank below the bridge enroute Darel Valley, one can see an assembly of tents belonging to the gold washers searching for gold in the river Indus. Known as Marutch, a nomadic people they conjure a throwback to Herodotus and his fable of the Gold Digging Ants. In the chilas-shatial belt gold has been washed from the River Indus since times immemorial. During the summer, meltwater from the mountains caused the Indus to carry gold dust along with the sand

downstream where it was collected and sieved by the villagers. Before the bridge was built the Marutch also doubled as raftsmen ferrying people and goods across the river on skin rafts.

Inside Darel Valley old forts and fortified sites dot the landscape. It is also known for its wooden architecture with the pillars and doors of most buildings carved in intricate geometrical and floral patterns, which are of recent origin but have been carried over from centuries of tradition. At Manikyal Bronze age grave sites have been discovered where old dug up utensils present striking similarity with the Gandharan graves in neighbouring KPK. But above all Darel is the recipient of a rich heritage of Buddhist tradition and centres of learning. The ruins of Buddhist Monasteries can be found strewn across the area whereas the old Buddhist University, one of the earliest in the region can be identified atop a hill just outside phuguch village. The surviving walls of the university are visible from a distance. To think that a region so pregnant and enlightened in its legacy could become so impoverished in its present outlook and progress is disconcerting. The area today is one of the most backward and regressive

regions in terms of literacy rates and other Human Development indicators especially gender equality. From housing one of the earliest seats of learning in the entire region to its present "Age of Darkness" it has been quite a transformation.

Plying ahead on an otherwise landslide prone region we reach Harban, the site for the much touted Diamer-Bhasha Dam. It is also a site riddled with conflicts. A stalemate over boundary issues between the people of Harban which falls under the Kohistan district of KPK and that of its neighbouring Thor which comes under the Diamer District of Gilgit-Baltistan had been brewing for quite some while. Apart from an already existing confrontation over the royalty issues of the Dam, there was also another conflict of ownership over a stretch of land claimed by both the regions. These issues become graver within the context of their implications for the development of the Dam and its centrality to the larger geo-economic calculus of Pakistan. The boundary demarcation matter was eventually settled by the end of 2016 but only after it took 11 lives leaving many other injured, a poor commentary on the tribal cultures and militant mindsets still permeating the region. Upon completion it would be the highest

Roller- Compacted RCC Dam in the world producing 4500 MW of electricity. The Dams strategic criticality notwithstanding, its development poses a serious threat to the invaluable petroglyphs (Rock Art - source of ancient history.) littered across its catchment area with the possibility of them lost for ever as they submerge underwater once the Dam is constructed.

The entire stretch from Shatial till Chillas houses one of the largest concentration and variation of petroglyphs in the world. There is a very logical rationale for this as Chillas has been the principal crossing point of the River Indus for centuries. According to ancient records Chillas was the name given to the entire region and not just the town as it stands today. Petroglyphs can be seen on both sides of the river at Chillas. They date back to the first or second century BCE and were left by nomads from the Northern steppes. The inscriptions mostly depict hunting and war motifs reflecting Parthian, Scythian and Yuezhi styling. By the first century CE the Silk Road too was formally established through the region and passing traders and Buddhist missionaries left their mark. There are inscriptions in Kharosthi, Brahimi, Sogdian, Iranian and

Sanskrit and motifs representative of Buddhist, Hindu, Nestorian Christian and Zoroastrian philosophies. However, Buddhist representation dominate the inscriptions and Buddhist pictographs in the Gandharan tradition can be found in copious amounts. It was along this very branch of The Silk Road which the KKH now maps, that Buddhism was transmitted from The Indus Valley to China and the Orient beyond. Just outside Chillas is a Kharosthi inscription engraved on a boulder referring to the Great Parthian King Gondophares for whom according to tradition St Thomas the apostle was asked to construct a palace at Taxila.

From Chillas we pass through Gunere Farm towards Raikot. At Raikot bridge while we keep going ahead, a turn towards the right leads to Fairy Meadows the base camp for trekkers wishing to summit the Nanga Parbat from the Raikot face. The gravel laden road leading to it is completely unmaintained. Apparently, many unskilled drivers have been devoured here. Dubbed as one of the most dangerous roads in the world it's a treacherous narrow course and towards the end can only be trekked on foot or very vigilantly on a bicycle. But once covered it opens into a breath-taking expanse of lush

grasslands embraced by pine covered hillocks, as snow clad peaks envelope the backdrop. The Reflection Lake right at its heart captures intricate impressions upon its glistening translucent waters. The place is indeed a wonder of nature in its own right.

### **Karakoram Highway**

Beyond Raikot there is an evident ease of travel as the road becomes smooth and motorable. I get to know that from here onwards begins the Chinese constructed part of the KKH at par with any other International Highway in the world - all the way till Khunjerab Pass at the China-Pakistan border. It is also designated as the highest metalled International Highway in the world. Literally gliding ahead, we come to Thalichi where the road bifurcates towards Astore (My hometown) and the Diamir district. It is also where the Nanga Parbat - 'Bare Mountain' can be seen in all its grandeur, dominating the area. As the Ninth highest peak in the world it soars at a height of 8126 m above sea level (GB also houses the second highest peak K2 or Mt Godwin Austen in Baltistan at a height of 8611 metres, while the greatest number of eight thousanders - peaks rising above 8000m above

sea level, in the world are also to be found within the Karakoram Range along with the longest Glaciers outside of the Polar regions). Nanga Parbat is also known as the "Killer Mountain" due to its notoriously tough climb, resulting in several deaths before its final Summit by an Austrian expedition team in 1953.

We soon reach Ramgadh as the evening chill starts to settle in. The old Ramgadh bridge built in 1906 still stands, though not in use. Just across it unfolds the dramatic spectacle showcasing the River Indus as it meets the Gilgit River in a tear shaped confluence, while the convergence of the three Great mountain ranges - the Himalayas, Karakoram and Hindukush takes shape above. Witnessing this incredible union of so many 'Greats' at the same time, in the same place evokes a romanticism of its own and a shared grandeur if you happen to be a native. Further ahead on the KKH (towards Hunza) comes the point of 'Continental Collision' where the phenomenon of Plate tectonics – colliding Indian and Eurasian plate resulted in the upward thrust of the earth's crust and ultimate creation of the Himalayan Mountain Range and the Tibetan Plateau – the former

being the highest Mountain Ranges in the world whereas the latter the highest Plateau. Probably no other region in the world has on display so much of Nature's Splendour as does the GB region.

### **The nostalgia**

As the night deepens we haste through Juglote. My mother's ancestral village Damote lies just above. The trail reminds me of my childhood trips, mostly for family weddings where we'd play around in the sprawling corn fields, trek to nearby Hot springs, plan adventures to the dreaded Pari's (fairy/witch) cave or simply wreak havoc on my grandfather's orange and walnut orchards, much to his chagrin and be doomed to writing practice in his library instead which having hosted great academics like Dr Ahmed Dani and Karl Jettmar. A keen observer of history my grandfather (like many retired bureaucrats) was engaged in collecting material for his intended treatise on the ancestral demographics of the region. Unfortunately life didn't spare him enough time to accomplish what he set out to do and the resources were later organised and published by his son (my uncle) instead.

Juglote is one of the busiest junctions in the entire GB as all districts of the region acquire access through it. Just across the river on its right bank lies Bunji, the garrison centre of the Maharaja of Kashmir's Army, renowned for its tough conditions. It also shot into notoriety for the bejaar – unpaid and forced labour that was employed during the construction of the Gilgit Road and later for the movement of military logistics across it forcefully employing young able-bodied men, again sans any wages. Even today it is invoked in Kashmir "Hay loghu Bawanji" – May you be sent to Bunji! as a curse! Ironically Bunji today prides itself for the highest literacy rate and gender equality index in the region and has been a steady contributor to the higher echelons of Pakistan's Military and Civilian bureaucracy. If at all, being sent to Bunji today would be a game-changer of sorts.

Some six miles ahead of Juglote the road branches off towards Skardu the capitol of Baltistan, Gilgit's sister region. Crossing Parri, we pass through the Chinese built Chanughar Tunnel. Emerging from

the tunnel to the starlit clear sky, the stillness broken only by the rushing river below as it devotedly traverses its course, encased by the animated Silhouettes of the Peaks above; I am taken to my father and the fact that he will no longer be there, gone forever, but how can that be, he would always come back, reclaim his space, have my back. That small bar of Mars Bar he'd bring from his travels far and wide – I didn't really like it, preferring Snickers instead, but never could find the heart to tell him! How could he just leave!

Light showers begin to trickle as we pass through the hamlets of Minyore and Sakwar to finally enter Gilgit City where the stuffed Markhors – Gilgit's magnificent National Animal, stand erect on its Gateway as if beckoning to the marvels that lie beyond. The rainfall symbolises Allah's Rehmat (mercy) giving me hope and the serenity to believe "Allah is the best planner".

So, this is it, the end of the Odyssey? A wrap on an era? The final lowering of the curtain? No, the legacy has just begun. I had roots in Gilgit, Now I have a part of my soul too. ■

**[Courtesy: *Greater Kashmir*, April 25, 2018.]**