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Features

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**"Epic
of
the
soil"**

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Taymour Soomro a scion of the old Sindhi family, goes back to the land

A renowned Sri Lankan architect, visiting Sindh, travelled from Sukkur, where he was designing a department store, to our farm in Jacobabad late last year at my invitation. "The landscape is luxuriant," he said, "from Hyderabad to Sukkur. Beyond, it is uninspiring."

Dense groves of bananas and orchards of dates and mangoes, often intercropped, shade the roads to and from Khairpur. And Sukkur perched on the banks of the Indus is a town of low bridges and leafy gardens. But as you turn away from the river towards Balochistan, gardens and orchards dwindle and the landscape becomes drier. Broad plains on either side reach as far as the eye can see, varied by an occasional cluster of tree, redbrick and thatch. It is uninspiring insofar as it is nature at her sparest. Unadorned with mountain or forest or oasis. Only man and landscape and the elements at their least merciful. We grow wheat in the winter and spring and rice in the summer and autumn and in this landscape the harvest is the ultimate testament to the reward of toil.

I engaged in toil of a quite different kind before I came here from London a year ago. There I worked as a corporate lawyer on mergers and acquisitions – "murders and executions" as Bret Easton Ellis would have it (which was apt insofar as someone you saw on Monday might not be there on Friday).

February's national elections brought me back to Jacobabad after a decade or more. Perhaps my childhood memories edited out the potholed roads and open sewers or maybe things have changed. "There were no public buildings of any sort; no churches, chapels, town-hall, institute, theatre; and the principal



Entrance of Sir William Mansfield into Jacobabad, Scinde



Mr & Mrs Illahi Bukhsh Soomro with their son Zubyr, Karachi, 1950



Illahi Bukhsh Soomro, then Executive Engineer at the Sukkur Barrage, 1954



streets in the heart of the town in which were situated the coarse and grimy shops, though formed by houses of a greater elevation than the preceding, were equally narrow and if possible more dirty. At every fourth or fifth house, alleys seldom above a yard wide, and streaming with filth, opened out of the street.” That’s how Disraeli described the fictional town of Marney in his Victorian novel *Sybil or The Two Nations*, though it describes modern Jacobabad quite aptly, as I imagine it does swathes of urban Pakistan. We’ve had two-nation theories of our very own in a number of contexts but the two nations he wrote about then were the rich and poor – “two nations between whom there is no sympathy.” That was arguably truer in Victorian England than it is now here, where some non-governmental agencies are working hard to fill the gaps in social welfare created by the functional absence of governmental agencies.

Like many towns around the country, Jacobabad is the Islamic outback of Western imagination: men with four wives, women in purdah and the highest rate of honour crimes in the province. I visited the Institute of Business Administration in nearby Sukkur and was impressed to be told that close to half of its students are women, many from villages in the vicinity. I mentioned as much to a servant here. “But there are women there!” he exclaimed with concern. “And if there are women, there will be love and love marriage. That may be good for people like you but it isn’t for us.” So here they keep their women hidden. And if they get tired of looking at their four wives or mother or sister, there’s a cinema showing blue movies on the edge of town.

In the villages, life seems a little different. Manual labour is often cheaper than mechanical and women and children do much of the fieldwork. In that sense, little changes. I recently found in the middle of a large notebook amongst dusty files under the roll-top of a desk in my grandfather Elahi Bakhsh Soomro’s dressing room, diary entries of his from the summer and autumn of 1972, when he began farming after being removed as DG Karachi Development Authority by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto during his political purge of the civil service. Grandfather’s concerns then are ours now: water shortages, crop theft, fertilizer quotas, hari control. Then, great swathes of our land were uncultivable because of unevenness and insufficient irrigation. “You couldn’t see from one side to the other,” he says. He leveled and re-irrigated the land. He modernised the accounting system. But not all of his efforts at modernisation were equally successful. On 15 October 1972, he wrote: “There was a lot of uproar about the system of ‘sat’ I wanted to introduce. However because of pressure from haris and advice from Ahmed Mian I went back to their old faulty system.” (‘Sat’ is the process by which haris manually thresh paddy, by beating it against a rock for example.)

Someone complained of me, “How strange he is. He doesn’t talk.” People can be very frank here. I’m not strange, I wanted to say – but I couldn’t. My Sindhi is too poor. My palate struggles to accommodate many of its 52 letters. The United States Department of Defense provides online tutorials for its employees and other federal agents in a range of languages including Sindhi. That was a start though ultimately it taught me more about US foreign policy than language. I can now say, “Stop or I will shoot!” (Bee ra nat ma shoot kandas!) and “You are a prisoner!” (Too kaydee aahee!) and “Follow our orders!” (Asaajey hukman pervee kar!) All a little too exclamatory to be of much use for general



From left to right: Illahi Bukhsh Soomro, Pir Pagaro, Ghulam Ali Nana, Khawaja Nazimuddin, the then American Consul General, his aide sitting in front – at Pir jo Goth, 1953



Zubyr, Illahi Bukhsh and Haji Moula Bukhsh Soomro at Karachi Airport, 1950

conversation. Overkill, perhaps, for inefficient staff.

It is most frustrating not to be able to understand the old men with crooked limbs and red beards and black-rimmed eyes who come for favours every morning and lobby animatedly till the afternoon. One approached me solemnly, presenting me with a laminated business card of my father's. He watched me read it, then turned wordlessly and left. Another argued at length about his in-laws harassing him – and later a translator revealed he'd killed his wife and occupied their land.

I am uncomfortable relying on translators. Particularly as there seems to be a trust deficit here. The first member of my retinue advised me not to trust the second. The second advised me not to trust the third. The third advised against the first. And the fourth, whom I do not trust instinctively, advised against the rest. In that sense I suppose, it is an advantage that I cannot converse.

The pace of life though is particularly attractive. "Here the long sense of classic measure cures / The spirit weary of its difficult pain," writes Vita Sackville-West in *The Land*, her epic poem on farming, "Here the old Bacchic piety endures, / Here the sweet legends of the world remain." There seems an honesty to work that understands its parameters. When the harvest is plentiful, there was toil and good fortune – neither sufficient alone. And its rhythm and cycle – yoked to the seasons – are informed by that philosophy.

The Sri Lankan offered to build us a fort. "It isn't safe, I've heard," he said. "And there's nothing to see. I can hide you behind high walls and you can make your own view". But you see, a view is nothing without context. It speaks more than of "distance and air" (as George Emerson would have it in *Room with a View*). In the late summer, the fields are lush with paddy that turns golden come autumn and in winter, the earth is ploughed and sown with wheat and mustard that flowers yellow in spring. It is a view that sings Vita Sackville-West's "mild continuous epic of the soil". And that is inspiration.

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