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## WHAT THE WORLD CAN EXPECT FROM TRUMP 2.0

A lot has happened on the global stage since the erratic first term of the US president-elect. Among US allies and adversaries, a guessing game has already begun

By NAVEED HUSSAIN



Donald Trump has trumped all odds, oddities, and omens to reclaim the White House in a dramatic political comeback. He survived two assassination attempts, two impeachments and a slew of criminal cases to pull off this spectacular feat, defying all the political pundits who had long written his political epitaph. Why Trump won and Kamala Harris lost is a different debate on which political commentators will continue to weigh in. Right now, the question worldwide is, what will be Trump 2.0's foreign policy. A guessing game has already started because during his first term in the Oval Office he was erratic and unpredictable – if not whimsical, in his foreign policy dealings. A lot has happened on the global stage since. We have three wars raging on, in Ukraine, Gaza, and Lebanon; Iran-Israel confrontation threatens to spiral into a wider conflict; Iran-Saudi, and Saudi-Houthi détente has changed security landscape in the Gulf; geopolitical realignments have taken place in Africa; and US-China trade and technology war has escalated. Trump, on the campaign trail, promised to end wars and pursue an 'America First' policy. Let's analyse possible contours of the US foreign policy under Trump.

## Nightmare comes to life

Russian forces have made substantial gains in Ukraine since last month. They've broken through Ukrainian defenses in the Donbas region and secured more than 160 square miles, capturing strategic towns en route. Russian troops are now on the gates of Pokrovsk, a logistics hub that could pave the way for Moscow to advance in the Donetsk region and beyond. Fears run rampant that a Trump-led US administration would abandon Ukraine. "The situation on the front-line is obvious. It's a military defeat. The Americans will get out of this war," Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said last week. "Europe alone cannot finance this war."

These fears stem from Trump's statements before the elections: He claimed that he would end the war "in 24 hours"; he called the Ukrainian leader "one of the greatest salesmen I've ever seen" who gets \$100 billion on every visit to Congress; he said, "Zelensky should never have let this war start." Trump wouldn't say how he would end the deadliest and costliest war in Europe after WWII. However, he

“ Trump's return might embolden Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who once called him the “best friend that Israel has ever had in the White House.”

said he would meet with Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. The Russian leader has already said that he is “ready” for dialogue with Trump who he described as “courageous real man.” Some reports citing a secret plan claim that Trump would pressure Zelensky to give up some territory, especially Crimea and the Donbas border regions, in return for cessation of hostilities. The Ukrainian leader, however, has said he won't accept such a “primitive idea.”

Zelensky may abhor territorial concessions, but given Trump's impulsiveness, if he decides to end the war, he could negotiate a deal with Putin without Kyiv's input. Zelensky would have no option but to acquiesce because Trump could threaten to pull the plug on crucial military aid, while Europe alone wouldn't be able to keep Ukraine fighting. Hardline European leaders dread such a scenario because they believe this could whet Putin's appetite for “territorial grab.”

## Real-time apocalypse

Trump's return might embolden Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who once called him the “best friend that Israel has ever had in the White House.” He might be tempted to finish off the job in Gaza and Lebanon by decimating Hezbollah and Hamas. The dismissal of his Defence Minister Yoav Gallant on the day of Trump's election indicates the same because a.) Gallant was on good terms with Trump's political rival Joe Biden; and, b.) He pushed Netanyahu to withdraw troops from Gaza as all “military objectives have been achieved,” and negotiate a hostage-for-peace deal. The Israeli leader was quick to celebrate Trump's “historic return to the White House” which he said “offers a new beginning for America and a powerful recommitment to the great alliance between Israel and America.”

Throughout his campaign, Trump didn't offer any indication on how he would handle Israel's wars in Gaza and Lebanon. However, on and off he called on Tel Aviv to wrap up its military campaign in Gaza – not out of concern for Palestinian lives, but because the apocalyptic images from Gaza were eroding support for Israel among western public. Nonetheless, if his first term is any indication, Trump would maintain unlimited US military and diplomatic support for the Jewish state because in 2017 he had taken several autocratic steps to appease Israel despite global outcry – including recognition of “undivided” Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and acceptance of Tel Aviv's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which belong to Syria.

There are speculations that Trump might push Netanyahu to finish off the Gaza and Lebanon wars, declare victory as it has already significantly degraded Hezbollah and Hamas, and focus on normalisation with Arab states as envisaged in the Abraham Accords. If that happens, there will be little chance of revival of the moribund two-state solution, at least for the next four years. It's unclear if Saudi Arabia, which has linked Israel's recognition with the establishment of a Palestinian state, would agree to such normalisation. If the Saudis don't agree, then Israel's integration in the Arab world would remain difficult.

## In a bind

For Iran, Trump's second coming should be a nightmare. Throughout his first time, he pursued a policy of “maximum pressure” on Tehran and ordered several provocative actions. In 2018, he unilaterally scrapped the Iran nuclear deal, calling it a “horrible one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made.” He re-imposed crippling sanctions on the Islamic republic and authorised the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard's top commander Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike that stoked tensions region-wide. On the campaign trail, Trump criticised President Joe Biden for not endorsing Netanyahu's plan to target Iran's nuclear facilities in response to the Islamic republic's missiles barrage into Israel. “When they [Israelis] asked him [Biden] that question, the answer should have been, [hit the nuclear first, and worry about the rest later,” Trump said, indicating that if he were in the Oval Office, he would have acted otherwise.

The recent indictment in the US of an operative for an alleged Iranian plot to assassinate Trump sets the ominous tone for what Tehran should expect over the next four years. Trump might be working on different options, but the overall policy would remain of “maximum pressure.” His administration could tighten sanctions on Iran's oil industry to dry up its coffers. He could also try to isolate Tehran by integrating Israel into the Arab world and then go for a regime change in an economically-crippled and diplomatically-ostracised Iran. Another option could be pressuring the Islamic republic to accept a nuclear deal on American-Israeli terms or risk its nuclear facilities. However, an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear sites would trigger a wider war in the Middle East, which is already teetering on the brink. Iran's regional isolation wouldn't be easy either, especially in the changed security landscape shaped by the China-brokered rapprochement between Iran and its regional counterweight Saudi Arabia.

“ The Biden administration pursued a policy of ‘low engagement’ since Pakistan was not a focus of its National Security Strategy. Trump is likely to continue a similar policy

## Bumpy ride?

During his first term, Trump's relations with Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping started with a president-to-president bromance, but it turned sour soon, especially due to bilateral trade, origin of Covid-19 pandemic, and Taiwan. As tensions escalated, Trump slapped tariffs on more than \$360 billion worth of Chinese products, accused China of intellectual property and technology theft, and blamed Beijing for “stealing” American jobs. Interestingly, Biden, who was highly critical of Trump's tariff war with China, retained most of those tariffs and added more duties on imports, including steel, solar cells and electric vehicles, instead with the greater American geopolitical strategy of containing China.

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# A RETURN TO VITRIOL

The US braces for deeper division and turmoil as its 47th president-elect returns to the White House

By **HAMMAD SARFRAZ**

Anyone holding onto the hope that America's political nightmare would end with the 2024 presidential election has already faced a moment of reckoning. If the caustic rhetoric of the campaign was a prelude, the actual horror show will begin on January 20, 2025, when Donald Trump returns to the Oval Office. He succeeds Joe Biden, whose presidency will be remembered for its slide into incoherence, marked by gaffes and a hastily expedited political end, driven by a party increasingly eager to move on. But the Democratic leadership delayed too long in pushing the aging president to pass the baton to his deputy, Kamala Harris.

That said, at least according to the polls, this was America's closest presidential race since 2000 and the most fiercely contested on the ground, with both sides fighting tooth and nail until the end. Forecasting models showed a near 50/50 split right up until the day of the election. Throughout the campaign, the political temperature was anything but calm,

ery language is all the more surprising coming from a man who himself narrowly escaped a bullet at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, not too long ago.

Yet, even after surviving a second assassination attempt, Trump did not temper his rhetoric. Instead, he upped the ante, accusing his political opponents of inciting violence against him with their words. However, the charge rings hollow. His own record, unparalleled among modern US presidents, is marked by a history of inciting and threatening violence—not just against political opponents but also journalists and anyone he considered an adversary.

But for those following the firebrand leader's meteoric rise, none of this comes as a surprise. In 2016, during a rally in Las Vegas, then-candidate Trump declared his desire to 'punch' a heckler who interrupted his speech. Later in the same campaign, he voiced support for reinstating waterboarding, a controversial and brutal interrogation technique. When asked about it, Trump re-

entertain anything but the belief that he is their messiah. But that so-called 'higher purpose' is rooted in hostility, division, and disorder, both at home and abroad.

Since 2016, Donald Trump's incendiary rhetoric has woven itself into the fabric of American politics, leaving an indelible mark. Recently, media outlets have documented the extent of this verbal assault. According to The Atlantic, so far, the president-elect has made at least 40 such provocative statements publicly, with countless more delivered behind closed doors to his inner circle of 'confidants'—individuals who, like him, share similar views on most matters.

This tendency to escalate rhetoric was evident as early as 2015, when then-candidate Trump, responding to a Fox News question about a protester at an Alabama rally, said: "Maybe he should have been roughed up, because it was absolutely disgusting what he was doing."

Such remarks, however, cannot be dismissed as isolated slips. Gradually, he escalated his vitriol,



with the Trump camp dominating the discourse through violent and charged rhetoric aimed at all political opponents.

This vitriol showed no sign of abating. Just before the election, in an interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, Trump made more incendiary remarks. He branded Liz Cheney a war hawk, escalating his verbal attack by suggesting the prominent Republican critic should face gunfire in combat. "Let's put her with a rifle, standing there with nine barrels aimed at her. Let's see how she feels when the guns are trained on her face." He continued, "They're all war hawks when they're sitting in Washington, in a nice building, saying, Oh, gee, let's send 10,000 troops right into the mouth of the enemy." This fi-

sponded, "They said to me, 'What do you think of waterboarding?' I said, 'I think it's great, but I don't think we go far enough.' It's true, it's true—right? We don't go far enough."

While the former president finds it convenient to blame his opponents and vilify almost anyone but himself for America's problems, the reality is that the American political landscape has been shaped by the anger Trump has both stirred and attracted. To his followers, the republican leader has cast himself as their sole saviour: "I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution," he declared at last year's Conservative Political Action Conference summit. Unwavering, his loyal voters refuse to

appealing to an audience eager for statements laced with hate. "If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously, okay? Just knock the hell—I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees. I promise, I promise," he told a roaring crowd in Iowa during a campaign rally, just months before his first election victory. Such statements became emblematic of his approach – brash, unfiltered, and unabashedly courting the fervour of his supporters.

It was in 2016 that Donald Trump first issued a stark warning to America, predicting 'riots' if he were denied the Republican nomination at the party's national convention. "I think you'd have riots," he declared, signalling the kind of defiance that would come



## More than 90 per cent of counties swung in Trump's favour in the 2024 presidential election

to define his political style. While the unrest Trump predicted did not materialise at the convention, the echoes of those words were unmistakable in the years that followed.

More recently, when a young woman was killed protesting a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, the former president, rather than offering sympathy to the victim's family, stood in the lobby of Trump Tower in Manhattan and made one of the most controversial statements of his presidency. "I think there is blame on both sides," he told reporters, drawing a notorious equivalency that would resonate throughout his time in office.

In 2019, he claimed the backing of 'tough people,' warning in an interview with Breitbart, a right-wing outlet once run by his confidant Steve Bannon, that 'things could get bad' if they were pushed too far. "I have the support of the police, the military, the Bikers for Trump—I have the tough people," he said. "But they don't play it tough until they reach a certain point, and then it would be very bad, very bad."

Almost every year of Trump's political career is marked by remarks that incite or perpetuate violence in some form. In 2020, shortly after the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, which sparked widespread protests across the country, he infamously declared: "When the looting starts, the shooting starts." According to his former defence

secretary, Mark Esper, the president also spoke about protesters outside the White House, asking if they could be shot. "Can't you just shoot them? Just shoot them in the legs or something?" he reportedly said.

After surviving an assassination attempt this year, many of his followers insisted on one thing: that God had chosen him for a 'higher purpose.' Aware of the intense faith his supporters place in him, the former president has always pushed them to ever-greater extremes. Four years ago, on January 6, after losing the election to Biden, the republican leader tested the limits of their loyalty by encouraging them to march to the US Capitol. What unfolded that day is now etched in American history as the most significant assault on its democracy. His supporters, some of whom appeared almost bloodthirsty, stormed the Capitol, shouting for Speaker Nancy Pelosi, one of Trump's political opponents, as they ransacked its halls and corridors.

It should not surprise any political observer familiar with the signals of his election campaign that a Trump presidency would be defined by discord and turmoil. Indeed, it fulfilled those expectations with methodical precision. Yet, while the former president's incendiary rhetoric and relentless partisanship set the stage, Democrats unwittingly played into his hands. When Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential candidate in 2016, dismissed Trump support-

ers as a "basket of deplorables," it alienated a critical swath of undecided voters. President Biden, this year followed with a similar ill-judged remark, calling Trump's base "garbage"—words swiftly walked back by the White House, part of a pattern of statements from Biden that sometimes veer into incoherence or off-script rambling, generating more political strife than they resolve.

With America now bracing for a 'peaceful' transition to a new Trump era, the country appears set to struggle with healing the deep divisions and fractures that have long defined its political landscape. As The New York Times reports, more than 90 per cent of counties swung in Trump's favour in 2024. His decisive victory was driven by red shifts across the nation, with gains among nearly every demographic. Moreover, the former president improved on his 2020 margin in 2,367 counties, while his margin decreased in just 240. Trump also strengthened his position in areas that had previously supported him, as well as in counties that have traditionally leaned Democratic.

None of this suggests that the dawn of Trump's age will come to an end anytime soon. Let's not forget the president-elect's warning, made long before his latest electoral victory: "In four years, you don't have to vote again. We'll have it fixed so good, you're not gonna have to vote," he told his Christian supporters in May.

If anything, it is now safe to say that the 'morning in America' that Ronald Reagan, the 40th president, optimistically declared in the 1980s has ended, and a long period of darkness and division now looms over the country—affecting both those who voted for Trump and those who opposed him.

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## Fears run rampant that a Trump-led US would abandon Ukraine. Before the elections he claimed that he would end the war 'in 24 hours'

Fears abound that China would have a bumpy relations with the US under Trump who has vowed throughout his campaign that he would impose 60 per cent tariffs on Chinese products, and even 200 per cent in case Beijing invades Taiwan. He also has plans to offer tax credits to woo US investors to relocate businesses out of China in an attempt to create jobs for Americans.

However, experts believe this trade war is a double-edged sword as it hit the Chinese economy, but at a great cost to the US. They say that the US trade war failed to realise its goals of changing the huge trade deficit and the structural de-

pendence between the two countries. They also say that should Trump follow through on his tariffs-hike threat, China might work around a way by increasing its exports to Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. However, the drop in Chinese imports in the US would lead to a shortage of

supply of some products, drive up prices, increase production costs for certain finished goods, and raise cost of living for ordinary Americans, piling up burdens on businesses and consumers alike. Moreover, China-based American companies would also feel the heat of the trade and technology

war between the two global economic powerhouses. Over 70,000 American firms have invested and operated in China, with nearly 90 per cent of their operations profitable, according to the 2024 China Business Climate Survey Report released by the American Chamber of Commerce in China.

### Postscript

With so many pressing issues already on his table, Trump may not have Pakistan high on his priority list. Trump's victory sparked verbal dueling and meme wars between workers of ruling and opposition parties on social media. Netizens affiliated with Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf celebrated the return of Trump

who, according to them, triumphed over the American "deep state" despite facing assassination attempts, smear campaigns, and criminal charges. They expect Trump would pressure Pakistan to release Imran Khan whom he once called "very good friend." However, the Foreign Office dismissed these "speculative" suggestions, reiterating "noninterference" as the basis for bilateral relationship. PTI-sympathisers in the US may reach out to Trump's team, but he is unlikely to use the US administration influence for Khan's release.

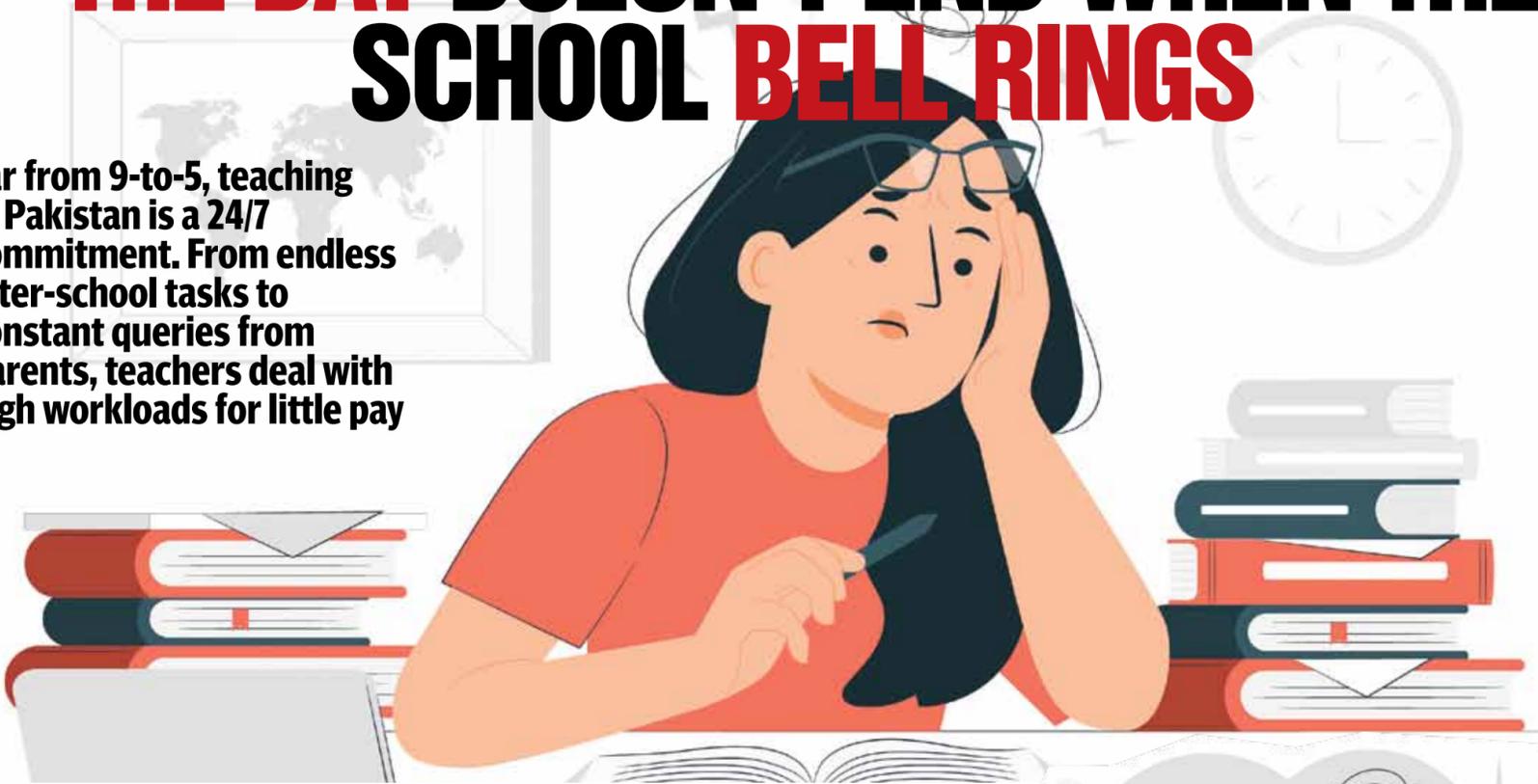
The start of US-Pakistan relations during Donald Trump's first term was rocky. Trump conditioned economic ties on Pakistan taking stronger ac-

tion against terrorist groups. Ties nosedived in January 2018, when Trump wrote an incendiary tweet, accusing Pakistan of "lies and deceit" in its dealings with the US. Subsequently, \$1.3 billion security assistance to Pakistan was cut off. However, a reset in ties occurred a year later due to a transactional approach driven by Pakistan's role in the Afghan peace process. The Biden administration pursued a policy of 'low engagement' since Pakistan was not a focus of its National Security Strategy. Trump is likely to continue a similar policy unless some new geopolitical motivation increases US interest in the region.



# THE DAY DOESN'T END WHEN THE SCHOOL BELL RINGS

**Far from 9-to-5, teaching in Pakistan is a 24/7 commitment. From endless after-school tasks to constant queries from parents, teachers deal with high workloads for little pay**



By **FAIZA SHAH**

At 5:30am the alarm goes off, and by 7am Salma Baig\* is out the door, grabbing the bag of papers she has checked up until 10pm the night before. During the recent monsoon season, Salma carried an umbrella in case of rain – along with her teacher's bag full of stationery, course books, students' copies, and her lunch box and water flask. This morning the smog is thick during the drive to school but she must reach an hour before the students arrive. The Punjab government has delayed school timing for students because of the hazardous air quality index.

Among the staff, Salma is a reliable resource. With 25 years of teaching experience in Karachi's top private schools, she recently moved to Lahore and currently teaches at an Islamic school. Given her own educational and professional background, she stands head and shoulders above the newer recruits in the staff, who enter the teaching profession with less professional experience as they are younger and have a different outlook than teachers from Salma's generation. "A teacher younger to me said your kind of teachers are not there any longer. Your values and approach to teaching are nearly extinct. To be honest, during my whole first year in this school, I did not meet a single teacher on the same wavelength as me, as they have not received the kind of training and education I have," shared Salma.

While she is at school, Salma does not have time to check her phone messages or receive calls. Although at home in the evenings, she attends calls from not just friends and family but junior colleagues asking for help with some assignment or other, the school staff who will sometimes organise online meetings and parents with some concerns about their children's academic progress. This profession of teaching, which is generally relegated to an easy job with convenient timings, especially for women who have children) does not appear to be so if you know a teacher personally. The work of a teacher is not over when the school bell rings in the afternoon and neither is the workload light enough to have your evenings free.

Despite

working overtime, a teachers' pay is not enough income to support a family comfortably. If you consider the time and effort a teacher who is also a mother invests in her work life, the inadequate pay makes it seem like a sacrifice.

While she teaches O level Pakistan Studies and English, Salma also carries out duties including rounding the kids at home time, helping younger teachers with their lessons, going to teacher training workshops, and chaperoning students who participate in competitions outside the campus.

When she returns home it is time to oversee her domestic staff and ensure her children have food when they are back from their respective offices. By 5pm or 6pm she has opened up her laptop to prepare her lesson plans, check copies or tests, and read up for the next day's classes. "Teachers are multitasking all day," she said; over her shoulder, she told one of her sons that she had warmed dinner for him.



**Despite working overtime, a teachers' pay is not enough income to support a family comfortably. If you consider the time and effort a teachers who are also mothers invests in her work life, the inadequate pay makes it seem like a sacrifice**

## The student to teacher ratio in Pakistan

Available data on student-teacher ratio shows that Pakistan's average student-teacher ratio is nearly twice as high as the world average. "Teachers in Punjab have a high workload because of multiple grade teaching in several schools and on average high student teacher ratios," according to the Saber Teachers Country report for the World Bank 2018. In 2018, the primary school student teacher ratio was 39:1 and the secondary school student teacher ratio was 31:1, which is higher, compared to better performing educational systems internationally.

For Sindh, the student teacher ratio was 39:1 at primary level, 25:1 at middle school

level and 30:1 at upper secondary level, according to the Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-22. These ratios have only increased, meaning the number of students enrolled keeps growing in relation to the number of teachers employed. Naturally, teachers in Pakistan will have work piling up on their desks – and in their homes – if they are looking after bigger and bigger classrooms.

Ideally, Salma suggests, every senior teacher should have a teacher's assistant where the number of students exceeds 30. She personally could use help with presentations and lesson planning or holding online classes – not that she doesn't have the know-how but some of the menial duties and typing would ease her workload and free up some time. "Can you believe that in this day and age, we don't have multimedia and we still have blackboards in the classrooms with chalk making teachers sick?"

The school administration plays an important role in facilitating or ne-

glecting teachers' requirements and rights. From setting the pay scale to delegating duties to controlling parent-teacher communication, every school has its own policies. Only a few can create healthy workplaces for teachers and pay them a satisfactory salary as well. The majority of schools are run like businesses to make profit. "Parents are called customers by the school authority so we have to deal with them in that way," Salma said, expressing some consternation. If a school's authority is based on such a model, it means that their employees will eventually be exploited to do as much work for as little pay as they can manage.

Nadia Sameer began

her teaching career right after college and continued when she got married and while she raised her children in Karachi. Having worked at various private schools, including those part of a countrywide chain of schools, one thing is common in all environments: "Too much to do, too little time," she said. She has worked in schools that pay well, and those that did not. She has taught in Karachi and now is teaching in

Dubai. There are marked differences among the system of education in Pakistan and UAE, of course. Yet everywhere, "Teaching is most definitely a 24/7 job," she maintains.

"Not only is it marking papers and assignments every day and lesson planning, but parents send emails and demand answers almost immediately," Nadia explained. Students send messages constantly as well, she said. The parents' WhatsApp groups are a particular annoyance. If one parent brings up something, suddenly all other parents in the group realise it and the next thing you know parents are sending emails to teachers regarding the issue. Constant and ready communication between parents and teachers online creates emergencies in a snowball effect. Consequently, the teachers get buried in an avalanche of demands that parents want to be fulfilled immediately.

"Our school has a rule that teachers must reply to parents but we are given 24 hours," she said, about her current place of work in Dubai. "Nobody should email after 6pm and before 7pm. This rule was recently introduced after complaints from teachers saying they never got any rest and were expected to reply as soon as the messages came."

Salma echoed this complaint and said preparing a lesson plan for day-to-day classes is a lengthy process as it is. Add to that the ease of access to teachers for students, admin and parents is "very taxing and annoying."

"Parents, students and admin form a troika and till four o'clock they can approach us," she said. "Two parents contacted me after 9pm yesterday while I was checking papers. I texted



them 'Busy now, contact on weekend.'" In the last school in Karachi where she taught for a long stint, teachers were not involved in communication with parents directly. Parents of students only had access to the administration and floor or section heads. It was strictly forbidden for teachers to share their phone numbers with students and their parents. "If we shared our phone number it was only secretly, without the admin knowing and only for cases where parents or children desperately wanted some academic guidance, not for tuition," she explained.

At times, the school places too many expectations on the teachers without providing sufficient resources. The most precious resource being time, teachers are obliged to take on responsibilities other than imparting education. "Too much admin work takes away the time from focusing on lesson planning," said Nadia. "Some schools give too little freedom and every teacher is expected to do what is dictated from the head office, which might not necessarily work in her class because all students' dynamics are different. With too many students in one class, the teacher can feel overwhelmed." If a conscientious teacher cannot give one or two students the attention she would like to give, she is then forced to give up on all of them since there simply isn't enough time to deliver the objectives that the head office demands and also guide and help the students.

When she started teaching, Nadia was a fresh graduate with computer science being her specialty subject. Yet, just because she spoke good English, she was told to teach English literature instead with the promise that the school would provide her resources and she would learn on the job.

"I taught English literature with the resources they provided, but I was always uncomfortable in class," she recalled. "I didn't know enough to answer all the questions." She was teaching grade eight so she could still manage her way through this awkward situation but she still believes the school should not have given her a subject that was not her forte.

"Similarly, again just because I spoke English, they asked me to lead the sports function, something the PE teachers should have done. Which meant an evening gone, with no compensation for it," she shared.

There is no standard adopted by private schools across the board in Pakistan. Some administrations show no compassion to hardworking teachers who are an asset to all soci-

ety. A disincensitising work culture at a school reflects poorly on the standard of students graduating out of it. If teachers are not shown respect and the level of education they deliver is not a priority, then the students suffer from subpar learning. "All teachers are not of the same calibre and all do not put in the same effort. Yet a below average teacher gets the same bonus of a mere 3000 rupees after one full year of hard work. No perks are awarded, no Eid bonuses. When a school authority treats you this way they do not let you enjoy life in school," Salma pointed out.

The fallout is borne by the students. "Students are not up to mark and the same students become teachers. Over the years, I have seen the students I get have very weak basics. They have no general knowledge and poor mannerisms. Primary education is vital to lay a solid foundation for secondary schooling," said Salma, talking about the values she has seen disappear from the sphere of learning in urban Pakistan.

"Children have lost respect for everyone, including teachers. They don't say salaam or good morning and overall their behaviour is sloppy and careless," said the senior teacher. This is a reflection of poor management and lower standards of hiring teachers. "Teachers should not be hired without training and if they have low standards, they cannot impart quality education," she concluded.

Nadia also highlighted the importance of professional development for educators. "In Dubai, they believe that even if you have been teaching 20 years, you should still get professionally more developed," she shared. She recommended continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers in Pakistan as well.

"The selection process for hiring teachers should also be transparent and merit based," added Nadia. "Here, at every level you're meant to give exams but can't go higher without the certification."

Committed and able educators are found few and far between. They are role models who shape our future generations and contribute to our society with sincerity and diligence. They should be lauded for their sacrifice and daily endeavours and treated with the respect their status deserves in the professional world. Their recommendations and suggestions to improve the role of teachers in Pakistan should be given serious consideration for the sake of our society.

\*Name changed to protect identity





# DESPAIR UNSPOKEN

STORY BY: YUSRA SALIM

Mental illnesses are on the rise in Pakistan, pointing to a crisis that has to be addressed on a larger scale. But taboos and lack of awareness and facilities leave millions suffering in silence

Concern over mental health is on the rise in Pakistan, a nation of more than 230 million people, where significant issues persist due to cultural stigma, lack of awareness and poor facilities. The nation's health system finds it difficult to offer

prevalence of mental health issues in Pakistan and have found alarming patterns. Data to be believed from a private hospital found that between 15 and 35 per cent of people have mental health problems. For example, approximately four per

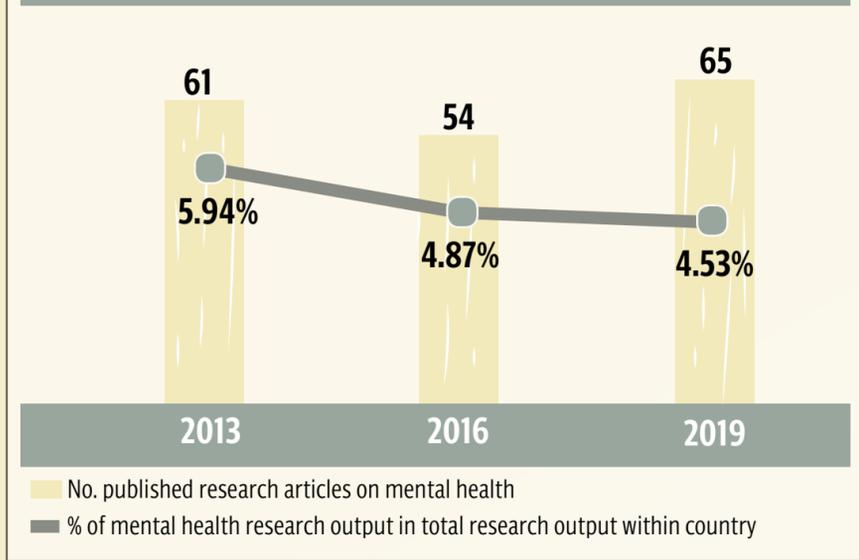
cent of Pakistanis suffer from anxiety disorders, while six per cent suffer from depression. Thirty per cent of healthcare workers, particularly physicians and nurses, report having mental health problems as a result of stress and burnout. These numbers were made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought with it higher stress, bereavement, and financial difficulties, all of which led to a notable increase in mental health conditions. "If you just search about mental health numbers on the internet, one can have an idea what the millennials are going through, but no one is ready to have this conversation," Khan said, adding that even few of her friends believed that she should focus on her work and family then just thinking about her mental issues more.

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cent of Pakistanis suffer from anxiety disorders, while six per cent suffer from depression. Thirty per cent of healthcare workers, particularly physicians and nurses, report having mental health problems as a result of stress and burnout. These numbers were made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought with it higher stress, bereavement, and financial difficulties, all of which led to a notable increase in mental health conditions. "If you just search about mental health numbers on the internet, one can have an idea what the millennials are going through, but no one is ready to have this conversation," Khan said, adding that even few of her friends believed that she should focus on her work and family then just thinking about her mental issues more.

Research indicates that approximately 15 per cent of Pakistanis suffer from anxiety disorders, while six per cent suffer from depression. Thirty per cent of healthcare workers, particularly physicians and nurses, report having mental health problems as a result of stress and burnout. These numbers were made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought with it higher stress, bereavement, and financial difficulties, all of which led to a notable increase in mental health conditions. "If you just search about mental health numbers on the internet, one can have an idea what the millennials are going through, but no one is ready to have this conversation," Khan said, adding that even few of her friends believed that she should focus on her work and family then just thinking about her mental issues more.

Output of research on mental health, 2013, 2016 and 2019



proper care even though mental health problems impact people of various ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic locations.

Mental health illnesses are increasing in Pakistan, impacting between 10 to 16 per cent of the population. According to estimates from the World Health Organisation (WHO), 25 per cent of Pakistanis may suffer from a mental health illness at some point in their lives. Millions of people suffer from some of the most common conditions, including schizophrenia, anxiety, and depression. It is concerning that up to 34 per cent of young people report having symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorders, with sadness and anxiety being especially common among women and young people. These figures point to a mental health crisis that has to be addressed on a larger scale.

"I was 29 when I realised I was suffering from anxiety and childhood trauma. During my master's programme, my university arranged counselling sessions. It has been almost five years that I have been visiting several psychologists and psychiatrists, and till today, no one in my family knows that I am undergoing therapy," said 34-year-old Yamna Khan\*. She also said that when any child shows symptoms of depression or anxiety, they are told that they are less religious and have no faith in Allah, while she prays five times a day and is also an avid reader of the Quran. "I once tried talking to my mother, and all she had to say was that mental health is a Western idea, and none of these problems exist in our culture," she lamented.

Numerous studies have tried to measure the

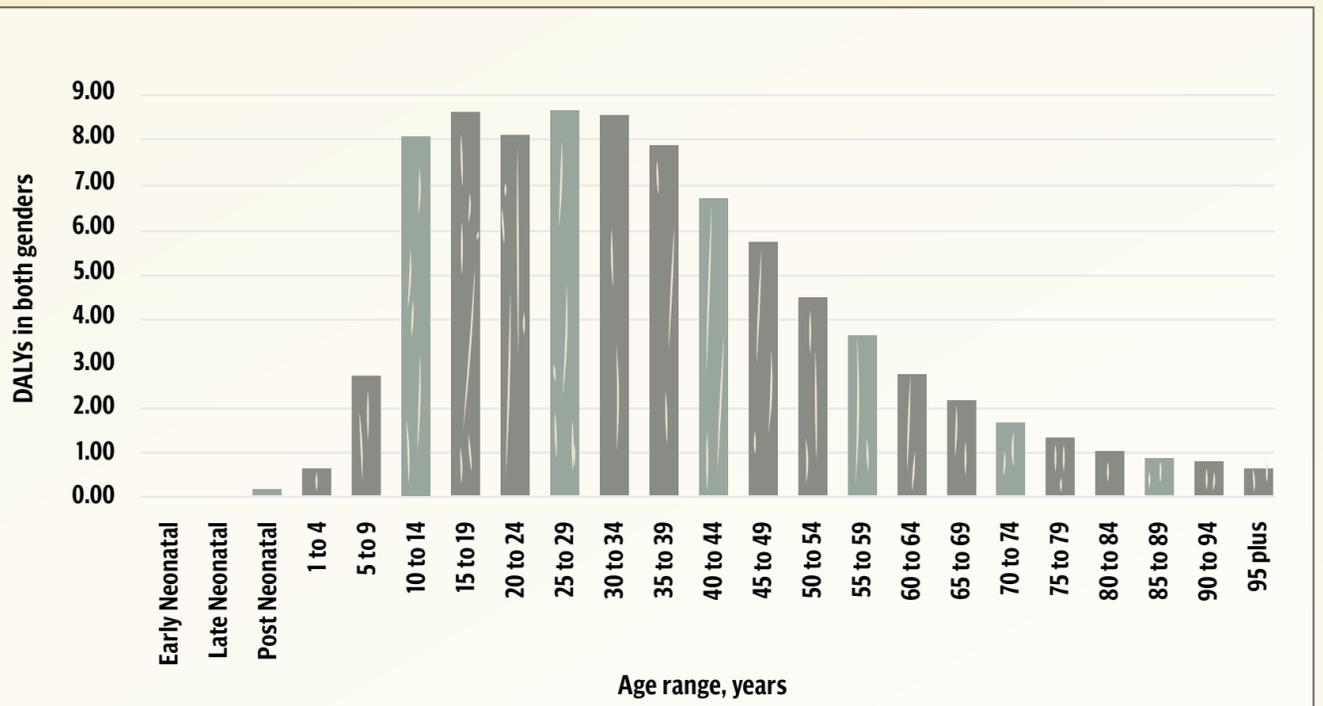


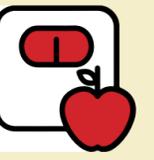
## I once tried talking to my mother, and all she had to say was that mental health is a Western idea, and none of these problems exist in our culture

cent of women have symptoms of postpartum depression. According to estimates, rates of anxiety and depression are significantly greater in rural and underdeveloped urban regions where access to mental health treatments is restricted. Furthermore, an increasing amount of data shows that school-age children and adolescents are dealing with mental health problems at previously

unheard-of levels, frequently as a result of social media exposure, bullying, and academic pressure. "Mental health and their understandings work like trends such as around 2018 we started hearing more and more about anxiety and depression, but nowadays the trend is about relationship problems such as everyone comes up with a word red flag in their conversations," said a clinical psychologist Syeda Masooma Zehra.

Mental health issues are still taboo, and longstanding social stigmas prevent people from talking openly about them or asking for help. People often reject therapy or counseling because of traditional beliefs that link mental illness to moral weakness or a spiritual deficit. "I have been taking therapy for almost four years now, and my family isn't aware of it, and I know the moment I tell





panic attacks. “Families may be reluctant to seek assistance for loved ones out of concern about social rejection and societal condemnation. Because of this, a lot of people with mental health issues endure silence, which frequently makes their symptoms worse,” Ali mentioned.

Mental health problems are also significantly influenced by economic difficulties. Pakistan’s high rates of poverty, unemployment, and inflation make its people more stressed, anxious, and depressed. “There are different classes to it, and the lowest is where one can’t afford, and they don’t even know how problematic their minds are, which eventually affects their children in later ages that is generational trauma for children, but the other case is where one understands the need of therapy but cannot afford,” said Zehra adding that such people can do many other things such as balancing their lives and creating healthy boundaries because even a psychologist can tell you what to do but implementing in life is one’s own decision.



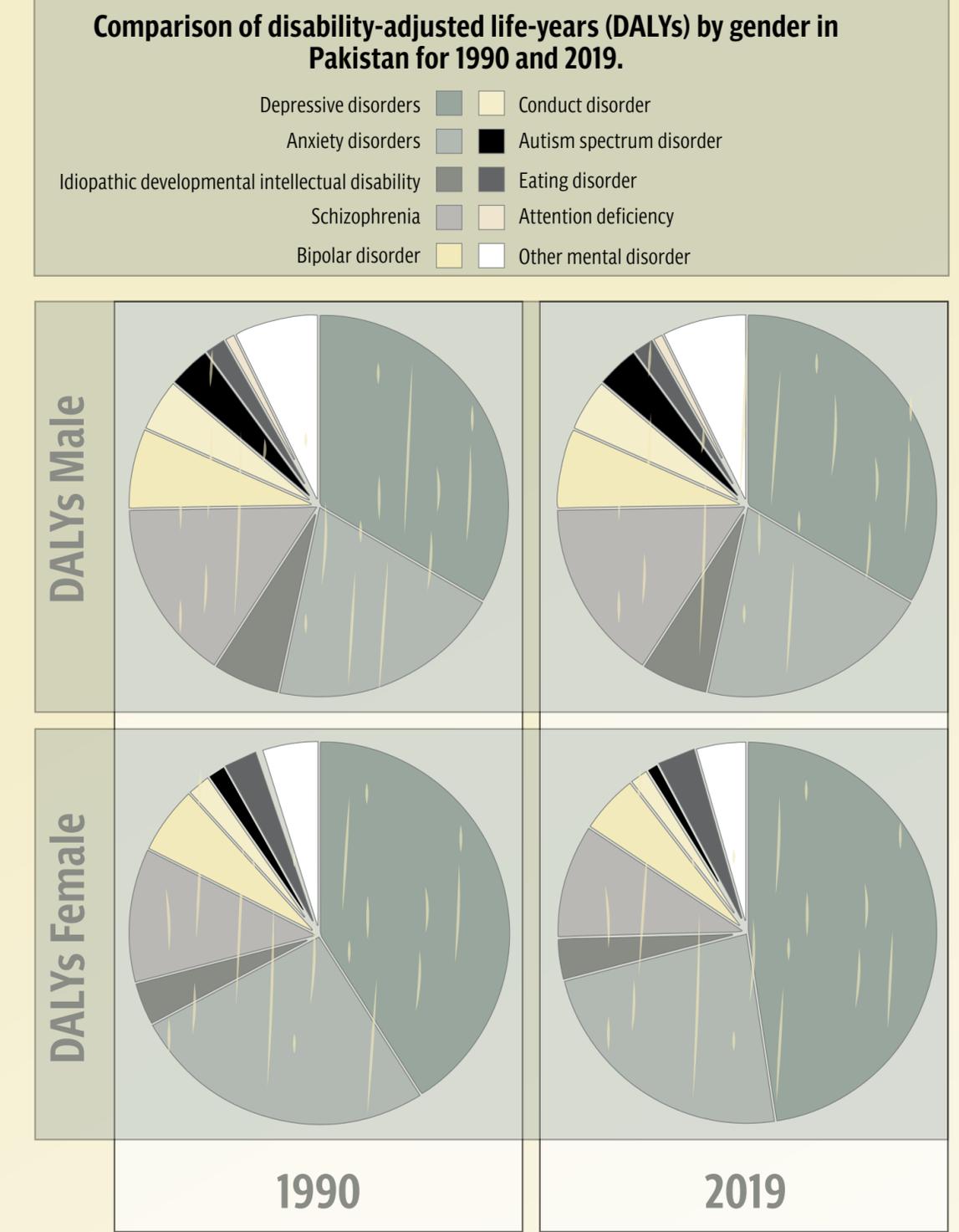
## If you just search about mental health numbers on the internet, one can have an idea what the millennials are going through, but no one is ready to have this conversation

Many households find it difficult to pay for essentials due to increased living expenses, which cause ongoing stress that negatively impacts mental health. Financial hardship and mental health problems are strongly correlated, with people in lower income categories reporting higher levels of psychological anguish. “Therapy is expensive, and there is no other way to say this, but there are other coping mechanisms that can help people who cannot afford such as when one feels pressurised or thinks he has an anxiety attack, he can divert it by just going out take a walk, but yes that too isn’t doable for many people given the situation of the city and law and order,” the psychologist explained.

The facilities and resources needed to adequately address mental health needs are lacking in Pakistan’s healthcare system. There are very few psychiatrists in the country and even fewer psychologists and counselors, most of whom are based in large cities. A country that has a population of over 230 million lacks access to mental health care. Furthermore, there aren’t many general hospitals that provide psychiatric care, and there aren’t enough inpatient facilities for people with serious mental illnesses. “Other than big hospitals that charge a handful of amount, psychiatry services are not available everywhere. I started searching for better affordable options, and the lowest I could find was 2500 per session, and the experienced doctor was 9000 rupees,” said Khan.

Due to the widespread use of smartphones and internet connectivity, social media has taken center stage in the lives of many Pakistanis, especially the younger generation. Social media can lead to long-lasting effects on mental health even while it offers chances for expression and connection. According to studies, excessive social media use is associated with feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and sadness, particularly when users contrast themselves with other people. “Having excess to information but the trends of influencing has gone far in real life, people try to compare their lives with others, even couples compare their marriage lives with celebrities which eventually ends in disappointment in reality,” the psychologist pointed out.

Mental health care is not vastly available across the country, especially in low-income and rural areas, compared to the rising demand for mental health care. Pakistan only allocates 0.4 per cent of its health budget to mental health, according to the WHO. Even if a few mental health institutions exist in large cities, they cannot serve everyone’s needs.



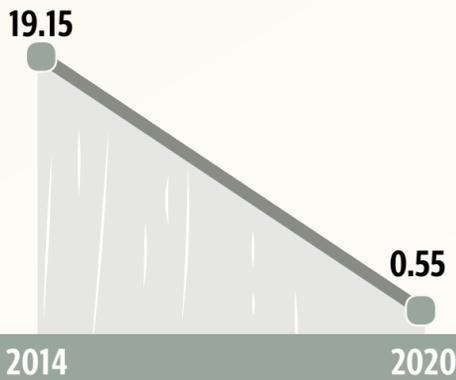
into a more comprehensive health policy. To raise awareness of mental health issues and enhance the standard of care in the province, the Sindh Mental Health Authority was founded. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) also passed the Mental Health Act in 2019 to enhance mental health services and offer legal protections.

Additionally, non-governmental organisations are also addressing deficiencies in the healthcare system. Services provided by groups like the Aman Foundation and the Pakistan Association for Mental

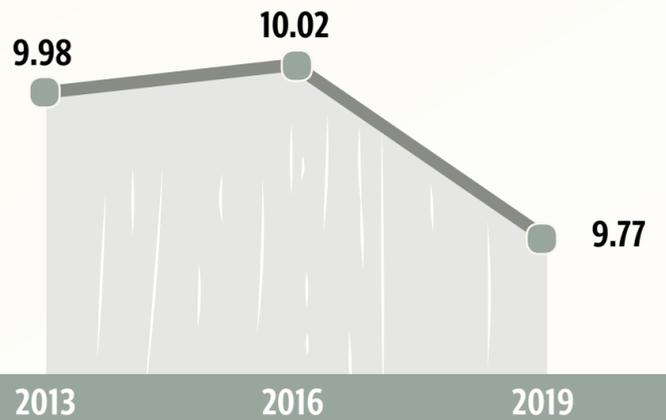
have to face anyone or don’t have to get out of their houses, but that can only work if pursued seriously and not exploited like happens in most of the cases,” said the psychologist.

Destigmatising mental health concerns requires raising public knowledge. People can learn about mental health through campaigns in communities, companies, and schools that highlight the fact that mental illness is a medical issue rather than a personal shortcoming. “A more accepting and helpful perspective on mental

Mental health workers per 100,000 population, 2014 and 2020



Age-standardised suicide mortality rate per 100,000 population, 2013, 2016 and 2019



The public is unaware of where and how to get help, and community-based support like therapy or counseling is either completely unavailable or prohibitively expensive. “Someone who has to go through social stigma, taboo, and financial pressure to step up still has few options, which is alarming in itself,” Zehra explained, adding that there aren’t many mental health hospitals except in big cities, and people travel great distances or turn to traditional healers because many smaller cities and rural areas lack mental health facilities. “My uncle’s condition was never understood and was taken to some religious shrine in rural Sindh when after losing his job he went into chronic depression,” shared Iqra Ahmed, who is a psychology student, she also pointed out that most millennials, the education and exposure has made the difference but the generation before them have been under the influence of blind beliefs.

“People who are in need frequently go untreated, which can have serious consequences in some situations and worsen mental health like my uncle committed suicide after four years and no proper help,” she shared.

To address mental health issues in Pakistan, several projects have been started recently. Though these efforts are still in their early stages, the government has attempted to integrate mental health



## Families may be reluctant to seek assistance for loved ones out of concern about social rejection and societal condemnation

Health (PAMH) range from direct counseling and therapy services to mental health awareness initiatives. By offering online counseling and support services to people who might not otherwise have access to mental health resources, telehealth platforms are becoming more and more popular as an alternative. “The Initiatives such as telepathy can help more and more people speak up as they don’t

health could also be promoted by media campaigns run by governmental and non-governmental organisations,” said Ahmed, who, with the help of her university and class fellows, arranges seminars and awareness campaigns about mental health.

Millions of people in Pakistan suffer from mental health problems, which have a significant negative social and economic impact on the country. Digital platforms and services can be used where in-person services are scarce; telemedicine provides a convenient and affordable means of providing mental health services. Particularly among tech-savvy young people and working professionals, the creation of telemedicine platforms and mental health applications may aid in closing the treatment gap. In Pakistan, online counseling services like Sehat Kahani are already available; growing these services could help a larger population. “Telemedicine is comparatively easier to take the first step in this direction and can help in building support groups and community-based mental health programmes that can offer people in emotional distress, but in some cases, even telemedicine isn’t enough,” Zehra said, adding that most people are told to talk to friends and rant but mostly friends cannot give good advice and wrong advice to an already depressed person can lead to severe consequences.



# KALASH – A PHOENICIAN CONNECTION IN CHITRAL?

Various theories have been presented to explain the origin of this enigmatic minority. The writer explores arguments that suggest a link with the Jebusites of Canaan



BY IJAZ AHMED

The Kalash are a non-indigenous tribe with a distinct culture, religion, and way of life living for centuries in District Chitral. Where they come from has been an enigma for centuries.

The first British envoy to the king of Kabul led by the honourable Mount-stuart Elphinstone started a story of Greek ancestry about the Kafir of Afghanistan who were the Kalash of present day Nuristan. In the 1890s, Amir Abdurehman forcefully converted the whole Kafiristan to Islam and changed its name too. However, the Kafir on the other side of the border, which was under rule of the Mehtar of Chitral, retained their Kalash religion and identity.

According to the three main theories written about the Kalash people, it is said that they are either Greeks, Aryans, local inhabitants and previous rulers of proper Chitral.

The Kalash people and their oral traditions tell a different story of a place they call Tsiyam, from which their forefathers came many centuries ago. This place has been identified with Yarkhun by some academics, while others say it is a place somewhere in Afghanistan. A research paper written by Gail H. Trail, of Summer Institute of Languages, interprets Tsiyam with Sham, the Urdu name for Syria.

The Greek theory says that Seleucus I, a general of Alexander who was governor of Bactria, could be Shalak Shah, who the Kalash name as their forefather. Or he could be the one who settled the Kalash people here. This Greek ancestry claim is one of the most prominent ones and pur-

ports that the Kalash people were left behind from Alexander's army, but a genetic study by Ayub, Mezzavilla, et al. (2015) found no evidence of this claim. Thus the hypothesis of Greek ancestry has no roots in reality. In my exploratory research on this subject by the Islamabad Think Tank, I posit the hypothesis that the Kalash people are Jebusites, or one of a subgroup of Canaanites who practiced a Phoenician religion. Phoenicians living in different city-states like Tiro, Jebus, Byblos, Sidon, had different deities specific to each city-states and one supreme god and goddess, which could be El and Asharat. Present day Israel and Palestine were known as Canaan before the arrival of Prophet Abraham. Canaan himself was a son of Ham, and grandson of Noah according to the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible. These Canaanites or Phoenicians used to worship several deities and basically were polytheists. There are many reasons to support my hypothesis – historically, religiously, culturally, and genetically. Historically, the last Canaanite city-state standing against the Israelite's kingdom was Jebus, which is present day Jerusalem. In Biblical description, King-Prophet David and the Israelites captured Jebus when they entered the city-state using a water canal. It's a known historical event remembered



against the Israelites. Once defeated, most of the Phoenicians living in Jebus were either killed, migrated to other lands, or later made serfs by King-Prophet Solomon.

A person named Shalak Shah is said to be the forefather of Kalash people, who came to either Kafiristan of Afghanistan or Kalash valley in Chitral. Now, Shalak or Shal-lak is a Hebrew word, which is a noun and it means an act of throwing something forcefully and Shah is a Persian word for Lord or King. These two words for the Kalash forefather's name indicates a forceful casting out of him and his people, which could be either the defeat at the hand of Israelites in siege and conquest of Jebus, or a mass migration due to harsh treatment after the defeat, or later conduct of the Israelites. Referring to their forefather as Shalak, Shah, and Khodai, which is also a Persian word for god, tells us of the Kalash people's long journey through Persia to Afghanistan and Chitral and interaction with Persian people and culture.

**Traces of Phoenician religion?** It is clear that apart from a patron-god, the Phoenicians had specific individual city-state deities, altars, female deities responsible for things like life and death, rain and drought, fertility and sex, and many other worldly matters.

Kalash people worship and follow different deities like the Phoenicians in different valleys either in Kafiristan in Afghanistan or Kalashgong in Chitral, Pakistan. Some of the different gods and goddesses are Irma/Mara, Sajigor, Mahandeo, Balumain, Dezalik, Ingaw, and Innan/Inn including others. In my research, I have found the names of deities that are similar to the deities of the Phoenician religion where they have Baal, his father-god Dagon, and female deity Innan who has many more names and equivalents like Isis and Ishtar. Irma, the supreme creator goddess of Kalash, with a temple dedicated to her located at the River Kushtiki. Irma is also pronounced as Emma, which is a Hebrew word for mother. It has a Jewish origin and means God's warrior princess. It is a historical fact that Jewish people went back to worship some Canaanites or Phoenician gods and goddesses like Baal, Ishtar/Ashur/Inanna or Inn as some Kalash people call it. In Puran



valley in Kafiristan of Afghanistan, Irma is known as Mara. This temple, called Makā by the population, was a large and high, tower-like structure, described as three times the height of a Parun house (2.5 m). It contained a number of deity figures, with that of Māra (probably on horseback) in the centre, and with some 17 other figures or objects serving as deity symbols as described by Max Klimburg in his research paper "The Art and Culture of Parun, Kafiristan". It is said to have been destroyed long ago and an effigy of Irma or Mara is placed in the Museum of Guimet in France.

**The Kalash festival of Chemosh** Culturally, Chemosh is the longest



religious festival of the Kalash people celebrated each year in December, which lasts for 14 days. It is celebrated by organising gatherings where people dance and enjoy music and animals, especially goats and sheep, are slaughtered in sacrifice. The local



economy is basically agrarian where they grow wheat, maize, and barley, with other fruits like walnuts, apricots, and apples. Chemosh marks the end of the season of fieldwork and harvesting. The festival has a long series of ceremonies, phases and rituals. Now, interestingly there is a supreme deity of the Canaanite city-state of Moab and the patron-god of its population and these people were "People of Chemosh", as per Edward Lipi ski, a Belgian Orientalist who wrote Itineraria Phoenicia. As for the Moabite evidence is concerned, Chemosh is attested both in native inscriptions on the one hand and in royal names transmitted in cuneiform texts on the other hand. In a stela of Meshah, the moabite king erected on occasion of the building a sacred high-

to be seen from the use of this theonym; a title attributed to a deity as a theophoric element in personal names, from the bulk of sheep offering presented to him and not least by the fact that the name of the 12th month is dK(-mi)-i, -'month of the festival for Kamis or Chemosh. This celebration and presence of a deity which is similar by name, and used to come to visit in both Kalash and Elbaitic cultures and also talks about the sacrificing of a lot of sheep in his honour and celebration.



**The Kalash dance** The Phoenician deity Baal Marqod is said to have either invented dance or incorporated dance in his worship. The Phoenicians used to dance in a group in religious or other festivities. It is said that the Irish tap dance and Lebanese Dabké dance are forms of Phoenician dance. The Kalash dance is similar to the Irish and the Lebanese dance, as they also dance in a group standing side by side with hands around other participants. They also had a council of elders and rich citizens who used to advise the ruler on important issues and used their wealth to get important positions in secular and religious institutions. Kalash people also have an assembly where they gather to talk about matters regarding religion, social, and other issues. The Phoenician culture included practices like women used to prostitute to honour their goddess Asherah, maybe to please her to get fertility, offspring, and a good sex life. In Kalash, although it has been abandoned now, there was a festival of Budalak or Shepherd King which was set on the tradition of sending a young healthy virgin boy to live in the mountains with goats, eating all natural food like butter, cheese, milk and meat of goats. On his return to the village, he would sleep with as many women as he wanted, with the consent of the women, as the logic behind this practice was to get healthy offspring, according to local people.

According to another book Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible written by Karel van der Toorn and Pieter Willem van der Horst, the divine name Chemosh has the phonological form 'kam(m)il, he was the first one being attested in the Eblaite

or Palaeosyrian, which is an extinct East Semitic language used during the 3rd millennium BC in Northern Syria of Ebla Kingdom. The great importance of the god Kamis or Chemosh in the private as well as in the official religion of Ebla Kingdom is



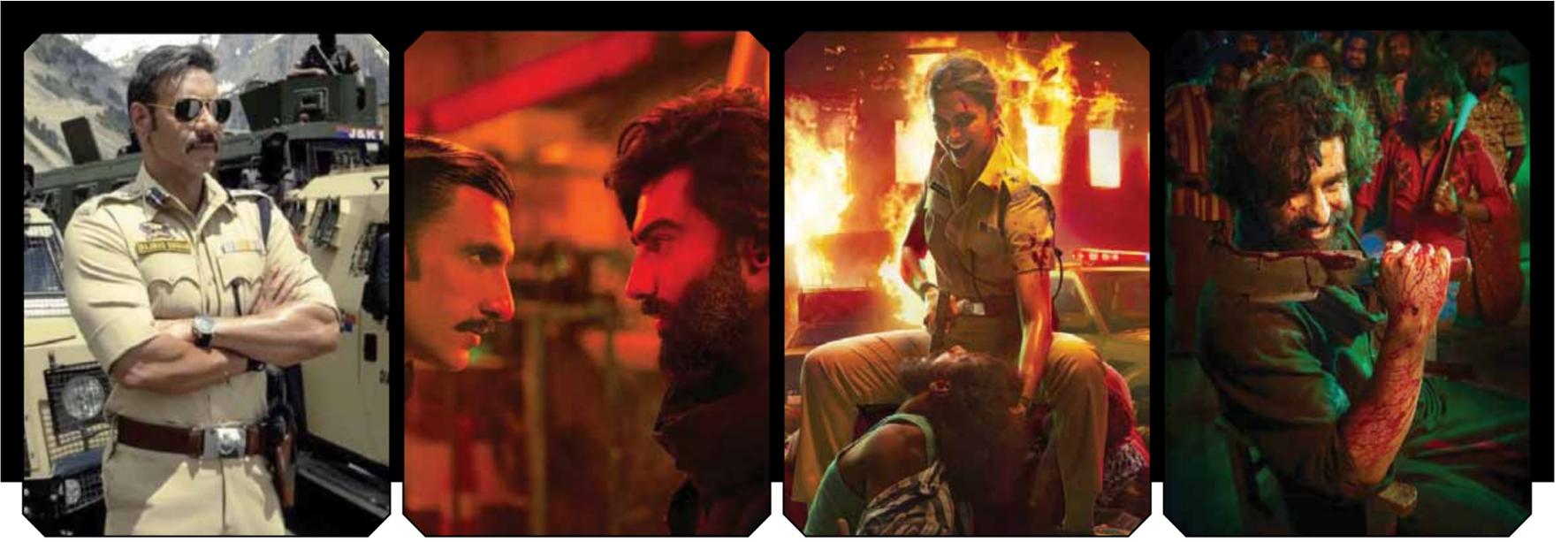
ceased with funerary rites, where dead bodies were buried with personal belongings, and offerings of food and drink were made to the dead to ensure that they would not trouble the living in the afterlife. Incense, music, singing devotional songs, and trance rituals and magic to speak to departed souls for future predictions were ritual practices. In Kalash culture when a person dies, it is not just a loss of a family member but it brings huge financial obligations. The family members of the deceased have to offer a feast with a sacrifice of a lot of animals, for three days for a male and one or two days for a female member. They also sing and dance around the bodies, singing devotional songs, praising the dead person, bringing the deceased's favourite things, and even firing to announce their arrival. Open burials with all the belongings of the deceased were once practiced but now it has been discontinued and deceased are buried now.

**What Kalash DNA reveals** In the modern world, the use of scientific methods of genetics to ascertain history, genealogy of people and others has become a norm. According to mitochondrial DNA research, the Kalash people mostly belong to Western Eurasia as most of the haplogroups of Kalash population pointed towards that area which is also Canaan or present day Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. Many recent studies done by researchers testify that Kalash people originate from Western Eurasia where the mystical place of Tsiyoon or Tsiyam exists, which is the place of origin of Kalash people as per their belief. According to the Genetic experts, humanity started in Africa and went out of Africa from the Horn of Africa. Haplogroup L1 and L2 stayed in Africa while haplogroup L3 migrated from the route mentioned above. A genetic analysis of Y-chromosome DNA by Firasat, Khalig, et al. (2007) on Kalash individuals found high and diverse frequencies of these Y-DNA Haplogroups like L3a is 22 percent, whose dispersal originated in East Africa and expanded to West Asia, and further to South and Southeast Asia in the course of a few millennia.

A genetic analysis of mitochondrial DNA by Quintana-Murci, Chaix, et al. (2004) stated that "the western Eurasian presence in the Kalash population reaches a frequency of 100%" with the most prevalent mtDNA Haplogroups being U4 (34%), Ro (23%), U2e (16%), and J2 (9%). Although a deep genetic study needs to verify my hypothesis, this presented evidence is very promising and directs us in the right direction.

In conclusion, I will state my hypothesis that Kalash people are Jebusites and originated from Tsiyam or Zion. I hope this article either puts an end to the debate of Kalash people origin or opens a new window for research.

Ijaz Ahmed is the founder of the Islamabad Think Tank and can be reached via email at founder@itt.org.pk All facts and information are the sole responsibility of the author



# SINGHAM AGAIN: ROARS BUT BARELY SOARS

Rohit Shetty's cop universe returns with cranked up action, but the Ramayana-inspired storyline falters in the chaos

By SHAFIQ UL HASSAN SIDDIQUI

Rohit Shetty, the filmmaker once famed for defying physics with his epic car blasts, shifted gears to no-brainer, multi-cast films packed with characters flaunting outlandish quirks. And guess what? The masses loved it, that's the key word here 'masses'. For many, Shetty's films are the ultimate guilty pleasure, reminiscent of the 70s and 80s cinema where a simple plot was wildly overdone, only to bring it all together in a classic climax. His Cop Universe was a smart move, he brilliantly linked Singham in Simmba and then introduced Sooryavanshi in Singham Returns, building a loyal following along the way.

Though his web series, Indian Police Force, didn't fare well on Amazon Prime, Shetty is back with a Diwali-style blockbuster, think big explosions and high-stakes drama. Singham Again promises a star-studded extravaganza, with Ajay Devgn, Kareena Kapoor, Akshay Kumar, Ranveer Singh, Deepika Padukone, Arjun Kapoor, Tiger Shroff, and Jackie Shroff, among others, taking the stage. It's everything Shetty fans crave, cranked up to full throttle.

Bajirao Singham is now settled with his wife, Avni, and their young son. But peace is short-lived as Singham is transferred to Srirang, where he faces a sinister threat from Omar Hafeez, the Lashkar leader who escaped Pakistan and is using drug trade profits to fund another terror strike on India. When Omar warns Singham of a deadly vengeance involving Simmba and Sooryavanshi, Singham takes matters into his own hands.

With a new elite unit, the Shiva Squad, Singham targets Omar's drug syndicate. But things escalate when Avni is kidnapped by Danger Lanka, one of Omar's key operatives. Racing against time, Singham and his allies, including DCP Shakti Shetty and ACP Satya Bali, uncover a deeper plot tied to Zubair

Hafeez, Omar's vengeful grandson, and Iqra Hafeez, his aunt. Together, they lay out a high-stakes rescue mission in Sri Lanka, ultimately leading to a final showdown. With Sooryavanshi and Simmba joining the action, the team rescues Avni, ending the terror network's reign. Back home, Avni's cultural production, Ramlila, is a grand success. In a post-credits twist, Chulbul Pandey shows up, ready to join the legendary Shiva Squad.

Singham Again brings back the iconic ensemble from Rohit Shetty's cop universe, staying true to his style of gathering everyone on one explosive screen. In the centre is Singham (Ajay Devgn), the unshakable force, serious, no-nonsense, and deeply patriotic. Singham's commitment to country, family, and justice is unbreakable, and he's ready to go to any length to defend them.

Then, we have Simmba (Ranveer Singh), who brings pure fun to the franchise with his humour and trademark swagger, aimed right at the kids and front-row crowd. Sooryavanshi (Akshay Kumar) is all about high-octane action, precision, and a certain ruthlessness that adds grit to the team. The latest additions? Shakti Shetty (Deepika Padukone), also known as "Lady Singham," who idolises Singham with fierce admiration, and Satya Bali (Tiger Shroff), the new, fearless recruit who is determined to prove his loyalty to Singham, no matter the stakes.

Of course, no Rohit Shetty film is incomplete without a formidable villain, and Danger Lanka (Arjun Kapoor) steps up to the challenge, deadly, smart, and ruthlessly loyal to his family. And don't miss the surprise appearance in the post-credits scene, which Shetty fans won't want to miss.

During the film's promotion, much was made of its storyline being inspired by and linked to the Ramayana. Sadly, what we see on screen is anything but cohesive or



logical. If you're looking for a gripping clash inspired by Rama and Raavana, two films that did this beautifully come to mind: Abhishek Bachchan's Raavan (2010) and the Akshay Kumar-Suniel Shetty starrer Dhadkan (2000). Both films drew parallels with the Ramayana, weaving their narratives with elegance and purpose, qualities that Singham Again simply doesn't capture.

Take Govinda's interpretation of Hanuman in Raavan, a character that added depth and intrigue, compared to Ranveer Singh here, who leans too heavily on exaggerated expressions. The characters lack strong writing, making this attempt at an epic tale feel anything but Ramayana. Removing the Ramleela subplot could have resulted in a tighter, more engaging film that would resonate better with audiences.

The fan base of Rohit Shetty's cop universe is definitely not interested in watching high octane drama, brilliant performances or stories that inspire or are relatable, hence there is nothing much to talk about in regard to the performances and

storytelling. They all fall flat or let's put it like there was no room for performances in this installment of the Singham. However, there are a few scenes and actors who stand out not because of the script but because of the kind of performers they are. Those who have seen Arjun Kapoor's Ishaqzaade and Aurangzeb must have an idea about his wild streak. He plays well in negative shades. Similarly, in Singham Again, Arjun Kapoor performs his part well. His scenes with Ajay Devgn and Ranveer Singh show his prowess in handling difficult characters with darker shades. In a scene with Kareena Kapoor, he establishes his character as an intelligent villain.

Ajay Devgn is the soul of this cop universe and he is at home ground when playing Bajirao Singham. He gives an earnest performance that is an extension of his previous Singham mannerism. Deepika Padukone looks way too irritating as Shakti Shetty. In the film she claims to be fan of Singham but the way she acted reminded me of Inspector Urmila Martodkar, played by Isha Kopikar, from Kya Kool Hain Hum.

She walked and talked like her and the remaining characteristics were taken from Simmba's character. Kareena Kapoor is another letdown in the movie. She performs her part halfheartedly. There are a few scenes where she could have made strong mark but she fails to bring the zing to her performance.

Looking at Tiger Shroff doing what he does best is definitely a treat. His stunts are like fluid but when it comes to performance, his performance is below average, like always. Action scenes look funny and super unrealistic. Imagine police officers not using rifles or pistols but locking up police stations' doors so they don't have to fight the gangsters. It felt like they were planted at convenient points to be beaten up by goons.

In this movie, the Government of India (GoI) supposedly lacks modern satellite tracking, resorting to setting up roadblocks across the city like it's the '90s. But when they do finally access satellite imagery, it's somehow a tilted, drone-like angle instead of a proper bird's-eye view.

The storyline unabashedly por-

trays India taking down enemies on foreign soil without so much as a courtesy call to the host government. At a time when international relations are under the spotlight, this "cloak-and-dagger" approach feels massively out of sync. And while the film proudly claims that "India doesn't negotiate with terrorists," it does seem that the government will spare no expense when it's about rescuing Bajirao's wife.

And for the grand finale, the GoI sends an entire aircraft carrier into international waters to retrieve six low-ranking officers from an "undercover" mission, only for the Sri Lankan police to conveniently show up and nab the villain, who's already deceased, mind you. Not a peep from the global community, either. Seems like "clandestine" has taken on a whole new meaning.

Singham Again is classic masala cinema, designed to stir up sentimental ties to the Ramayana for that emotional pull, while layering on heavy action and explosions. It's tailor-made for the masses, especially those front-row fans who live for big blasts and over-the-top moments. There's a crowded lineup of heroes, a good dose of mindless action, and the same brand of comedy that's been recycled year after year.

And then there's the Salman Khan cameo — quite a letdown. His father's iconic line, "Ab Ayega Maza" from Sholay (Gabbar Singh's classic), feels awkwardly shoe-horned in, coming off as forced rather than nostalgic. Even die-hard Salman fans would cringe at this half-hearted appearance. After all, you cannot expect The Silence of the Lambs kind of experience from The Expendables. Singham Again gets a three out of five from me.

Shafiq Ul Hassan Siddiqui is a film and TV critic, and a digital inbound marketer. He tweets @shafiqulhasan81 and can be followed on Instagram @shafiapenworks

All facts and information are the sole responsibility of the writer

## T Magazine's picks



**Binge this week:**  
Arcane

TV Show



The animated series is Netflix's take on the long-standing strategy game League of Legends and enjoys a large and loyal following. Designed by Fortiche Productions, the stellar animation is simply stunning to look at — hand-painted art where every scene is lavish, each character design distinct. It follows a three-part format with different story arcs, sporting a total of nine, 40-minute long episodes. The mental health element in the gripping storyline is well-researched and sensitively infused. Even if you're not a League of Legends fan, Arcane is something you should watch.



**Follow this week:**  
@thefineart collective

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If yellow is a colour of happiness, then what is the colour of elated? If you find yourself thinking deeply about the language of the colour palette, and view art as an incredible medium to express yourself, meet Matthew Olivier, Canadian artist and poet, whose experimental art showcases what happens when Classical Art intersects with Modern World? Renowned for his innovative approach to figurative art, characterised by an abstract flair infused with classical fundamentals, Olivier is also an author and an art history nerd. This is pure soul food.



**Watch this week:**  
Martha

Movies

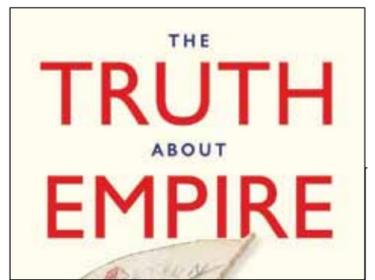


Whether you find her fascinating or hate her perfection, just because Martha Stewart herself slammed the documentary on her life, doesn't mean it shouldn't be on your watch list this weekend. From her childhood in New Jersey to her Sports Illustrated swimsuit cover, director R.J. Cutler's documentary is the greatest possible tribute one could want. It breaks down the life, motivations, secrets, and stories of America's first-ever influencer, pulling back the curtain on one of the most important cultural figures of the last half-century. It is totally worth the watch.



**Read this week:**  
The Truth About Empire by Sathnam Sanghera

Books



This essay collection is an accessible guide to the British Empire, and a weapon of defence against the assault on historical truth. The disturbing stories of Empire's culture, politics and economics show why professional research matters when deciding what can/cannot be known about Britain's colonial history. The book comes from expert historians who believe that the truth, as far as can be pinpointed, matters and their decades of painstaking research makes them worth listening to. Their authority as leading professionals is relevant in today's polarised debates over Britain's imperial past.



# TEA IN THE MOUNTAINS AND GOOD COMPANY

During my own trip to Kalam, a chance meeting with a solo Scottish-Spanish adventurer helped me reflect on our country's enchanting beauty in new light

By NABIL TAHIR

As autumn's warmth wanes, Kalam's lush valleys transform into a kaleidoscope of gold, amber, and crimson. The majestic Mahodand Lake shines like a sapphire, reflecting the surrounding mountains' rust-hued grandeur.

In Hunza, apricot and cherry trees stand bare, their branches etched against the sky like delicate pen and ink drawings. The ancient fortresses of Karimabad and Baltit seem to rise from the earth, their stone facades glowing golden in the fading light.

With the winter's chill beginning to bite, Kalam's meadows turn into a serene canvas of white, with snowflakes gently falling onto the valley's rolling hills. Hunza's snow-capped peaks shimmer like diamonds, their rugged beauty softened by the gentle silence of the season.

As I embarked on my own journey to Kalam, nestled in the heart of the Swat Valley, I chanced upon a Scottish-Spanish adventurer who had also been drawn to this enchanting land. Together, we navigated Pakistan's breathtaking natural wonders, discovering hidden gems and unexpected delights along the way.

## Marcos - the solo traveller

This was the perfect backdrop for an unforgettable encounter. It was there, within the towering mountains, that I met Marcos Lopez Moreau - a kindred spirit with a tale of adventure and discovery.

The person who started his journey in October this year, from the beautiful mountain ranges and landscapes of Pakistan was amazed to see the beauty of the country that is often labeled as dangerous. But the effort to start this tour was not easy for Marcos. Perched on a hilltop in Kalam, our conversation began with a breath-

country.

"I feel very welcomed by the people here," Marcos said, his Spanish accent infused with a hint of wonder. "They're curious, warm, and helpful. If you have any kind of problem, everyone is just going to be there to help you out." He chuckled, recalling instances where locals had gone out of their way to assist him, from offering tea to sharing stories about their villages. From Kalam, Marcos ventured into the Naltar Valley, where lush meadows and crystal-clear lakes mesmerized him. He marveled at the ancient rock carvings in the Hunza Valley and hiked to the base of Rakaposhi, one of the world's most beautiful mountains.

Marcos' journey had begun on October 1st, when he arrived in Pakistan, eager to explore the country's northern frontier. His friend, from Pakistan, had regaled him with tales of Pakistan's natural beauty and hospitality, and Marcos had been hooked. "He told me about all the marvelous things about Pakistan," Marcos recalled. "The mountains, the people, the food - and after so much wait I am traveling here, I can corroborate that

has been absolutely amazing." He spoke of the ancient rock carvings in the Hunza Valley, and the majestic fortresses of Karimabad and Baltit, their stone facades glowing golden in the fading light.

When asked about his favorite destination so far, Marcos hesitated, "It's very difficult to choose, but if I had to pick one, it would be Pasu." The glaciers, the Kailash Valley, and the cultural heritage of the region had left him awestruck.

As a solo traveler, Marcos had faced concerns about safety, particularly given the official warnings from his home country. However, his experience had been overwhelmingly positive. "Pakistan is absolutely safe," he asserted. "The people are just very helpful. I have not felt unsafe at any point, to be honest." Marcos' advice to fellow travelers was simple: "Pay attention to blogs and what people say on the Internet, rather than government recommendations." He believed that the reality of Pakistan was far removed from the negative perceptions perpetuated by official warnings.

"I think that the people from other countries should be paying more at-



"Till the money ends," he chuckled. With a carefree spirit and an insatiable curiosity, Marcos embodied the essence of adventure.

Before departing, Marcos reflected on the differences between the northern regions of Spain, where he grew up, and Pakistan. "The heights, the maximum, the biggest mountain that we have in the north of Spain is over 3,400 meters," he said. "Over here, you're surrounded by 7,000-meter peaks - that's a huge part of it."

As a seasoned traveler, Marcos had learned to appreciate the freedom and depth of connection that came with traveling alone. "You have more freedom, and you get to know more people," he explained. "You're alone, so you end up with the locals, and you get to get more deep into the culture and the people."

For Marcos, capturing the essence of his journey was not just about documenting every moment, but about immersing himself in the experience. When asked how he was capturing his travels, Marcos smiled, "Memories, definitely. That's what I came for." He revealed that he used

ture into that in Pakistan. "I've done some base camps and three-day trips, like camping, but not climbing to the top of the mountains - that's another level over here," he said with a grin.

## 'Scared is not the word'

Despite the occasional pang of caution, Marcos had never felt truly scared. "Precautions, yes, but scared is not the word," he clarified. His faith in the Pakistani people had been reaffirmed time and again, and he encouraged others to look beyond official warnings.

As he prepared to leave the mountains and venture into Pakistan's city life, Marcos admitted that he would miss the tranquility and rugged beauty of the north. "I'm going to be missing this for the rest of my life, probably," he said wistfully. Yet, he was eager to explore the cultural hotspots of Peshawar, Islamabad, and Lahore, and yes, Karachi too. "Though Karachi it is a bit far away but I would defiantly want to immerse in the gastronomy, music, and vibrant city life that Pakistan had to offer," he said.

"I'm really excited about going to the big cities and cultural hotspots," Marcos said, his voice filled with anticipation. "I want to explore more into that sense - the culture, the food, the music, and what life in the big cities looks like."

## The challenges of visiting Pakistan

Despite Pakistan's stunning natural beauty and rich cultural heritage, tourists often face significant challenges when planning a visit. One of the most frustrating challenges for Marcos was the difficulty in accessing Kashmir, a region renowned for its breathtaking landscapes. "I've heard good things about all parts of Kashmir, both Pakistani and Indian," he said,

bureaucratic complexities that tourists may face. "With a Spanish passport, you need a letter of invitation from a travel agency in order to get the Pakistan visa," he explained. This requirement adds an extra layer of complexity to the visa application process. He says that if this is made easy more tourists will come to Pakistan. "Many stop at this stage when they see that they have to get an additional document and that from Pakistan. If this is made easier many more people will visit this nature-gifted land," he added.

Travelers may also need to navigate permit requirements for specific regions or activities. Marcos' attempt to visit Kashmir was thwarted by permit issues, and similar restrictions may apply to other areas or activities.

Despite these challenges, Marcos' enthusiasm for Pakistan remained firm. His experiences serve as a reminder that, with careful planning and persistence, tourists can overcome these obstacles and discover the beauty and hospitality that Pakistan has to offer. Marcos' journey was a proof to the power of curiosity and adventure. He had sold everything to his possessions - to embark on this journey, and it had been a decision he would never regret.

## Drained cups

As our conversation drew to a close, Marcos glanced out the window, his gaze drifting toward the majestic mountains. The tea had long been drained from our cups, but the warmth of his stories lingered, a testament to the enduring allure of Pakistan's untamed beauty and its people's unconditional hospitality.

With a final smile, Marcos gathered his belongings, ready to embark on the next leg of his journey. As he disappeared into the streets of Kalam, his words echoed in the silence, "Pakistan is absolutely safe. The people are just very helpful." A traveler's testament to a country's unseen charm.

The snow-capped peaks of the Karakoram Range stood sentinel, witnesses to Marcos' incredible journey. As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the valley, the people of Pakistan - warm, welcoming, and resilient - remained etched in Marcos' memory, a reminder of the beauty that lay beyond the surface.

And so, Marcos' story became a thread in the intricate tapestry of Pakistan's travel lore, evidence to the transformative power of adventure and the boundless hospitality of a nation. As his journey continued, the memories of Pakistan's majestic landscapes, vibrant culture, and generous people would remain with him forever, a reminder of the incredible experiences that awaited those brave enough to venture off the beaten path.

In the fading light of day, the valley's silence was punctuated only by the distant call to prayer, a haunting melody that seemed to resonate deep within Marcos' soul. He knew that no matter where his travels took him next, Pakistan would forever hold a piece of his heart - a reminder of the beauty, wonder, and connection that awaited him in the most unexpected of places.



taking view of the valley below. As we wound our way down to the quaint Quetta Hotel café in Kalam Bazar, the gentle rustle of leaves and the soft hum of the village replaced the crisp mountain air. Settled into a cozy corner, Marcos cradled his steaming cup of tea, his eyes aglow with an unmistakable sense of freedom.

With a quiet conviction that commanded attention, he shared his remarkable story. "I sold everything," he declared, his voice infused with a deep satisfaction. "Every possession I owned - all gone." The simplicity of his words belied the courage and transformation that had brought him to this moment.

The question lingered: what drives someone to abandon the comforts of home for the unknown? "Pakistan's mountains," he replied, his gaze drifting toward the Himalayas. "I'd heard tales of their breathtaking beauty, their rugged majesty from a Pakistani friend on mine back in Scotland. I had to see it for myself."

But it was more than just the breathtaking landscapes that had captivated Marcos, whose journey began in Pakistan's northern frontier, where the Karakoram Range stretches toward the sky - it was the people, the culture, and the warmth that radiated from every corner of this

everything he told me was true."

## Switzerland of the East

As he traveled through Gilgit-Baltistan, Marcos marveled at the stunning valleys and villages, each one is evidence to Pakistan's untamed beauty. He trekked through the majestic glaciers of Pasu, and hiked to the breathtaking Swat Valley, dubbed the "Switzerland of the East." Each place had left an indelible mark on his heart, but it was the people that had truly made his experience unforgettable.

"I have enjoyed so much all Gilgit-Baltistan," Marcos said, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. "And now K-P

tention to the blogs and what the people say on the Internet, rather than the government recommendations," Marcos emphasized.

## Crossing the border

When asked about his plans after Pakistan, Marcos' eyes sparkled. "I'm crossing the Wagah border at some point over the next month, and I'm visiting India." His itinerary was vague, but his enthusiasm was palpable. "My plan in India is a bit vague, because I spent most of my energy organizing my travels through Pakistan."

Marcos' long-term goal was to travel for a year, or until his funds ran out.

a simple Pixpro camera, chosen for its ruggedness and affordability, but it was not his primary focus. "I'm just enjoying the moment," he said, explaining that he only took necessary pictures to recall his trip later.

The camera remained hidden in his bag most of the time, a deliberate choice to prioritize living in the moment over meticulous documentation. Marcos' approach reflected his desire to truly connect with Pakistan's people, culture, and landscapes, rather than simply chronicling his adventures.

As Marcos shared his experiences, he explained his passion for mountain climbing, though he hadn't ven-

"but sadly, as a foreigner, I cannot visit any of those places." Marcos attempted to obtain a permit to visit Kashmir in Pakistan but was denied. He plans to try again in India, but expects similar difficulties.

He also shared that obtaining a Pakistani visa proved to be an onerous task for Marcos. "This was the toughest visa I ever had to get," he admitted. With a Spanish passport, Marcos was accustomed to visa-free or visa-on-arrival travel, but Pakistan required a pre-arranged visa. The process took seven to eight days and cost around \$100, including a fee for an agency.

Marcos' experience highlights the

