

Pakistan - Seamus O'Leary

THREE YEARS OF SWEET TEA IN PAKISTAN

Many is the lengthy chat I had with Ellie, when we first met 9 years ago, about her experiences in Pakistan. Although she did acknowledge that there were difficulties, overall she spoke in glowing terms of a culture so different from her own. At the time of our chat we were both working in a Romanian care-centre, but that's another story. Ellie was quite insistent that I should consider going to Pakistan. However, it certainly wasn't among the places I had ever considered visiting. Yet things worked out differently in May 1998 when I found myself heading for Lahore to spend three years working there with the Columbans.

Most of the images I had of Pakistan before going were heavily influenced by the Media, and not too positive. I imagined that the atmosphere there would be a very tense and dour one. In general, I didn't get the impression that it would be a place for a foreigner to go wandering about. However, during the months of prior orientation, organised by the Columbans, a very different perspective became apparent. This was made all the more real by stories from others who had worked in various parts of the country. It seemed fascinating that one country could be home to such a varied mix of peoples, some barely interconnected across boundaries of wholly distinct languages and cultures.

What made me leave Ireland in the first place? At the time I wasn't quite sure myself. There seemed to be a desire to get involved in something a little more stable than my numerous ventures to Eastern Europe. Then, within that, there was a search to live out some sort of an appropriate response to the challenges and dysfunction of our world today. I wasn't under any illusion of having answers to inherent difficulties, but simply aspired to contribute something positive and learn a little as I went along.

Little of the above pre-occupied me too much during the first year in Lahore when everything from stomach bugs and summer temperatures of 47_C to chaotic traffic and a local obsession with cricket seemed to compete for attention. In fact most of that first year was spent learning Urdu, the national language. Nevertheless, settling in was helped a lot by the fact that Pakistan is home to such a hospitable people who make every effort to make their visitor feel at home... no shortage of sweet tea and plenty of chat! However, at first I did find many

locals far too inquisitive. Why did they ask so many personal questions, even when we had only just met?!! Later, I discovered that this was in fact a genuine effort to show interest in who I was as a person. In Pakistan relationships are at the heart of everything.

It might seem strange that the room in which I lived became a central focus of my time in Lahore. But, although it was located right in the very heart of an economically neglected and congested neighbourhood, it just pulsated with life. How strange it is that very often our presence to each other is what seems most essential in the midst of it all. Of course, the many contacts and relationships that developed from that focal point led to various opportunities for involvement at other levels. Much of my time seemed to be tied up with a local youth group in activities that varied from literacy classes and justice & peace advocacy work to conscientisation and street drama highlighting topical issues. Yet, the youth group did seem to come most alive whenever we staged a variety show in the main street of the neighbourhood - few seemed to mind that the street was thereby brought to a standstill for several hours. "Koi bat nahi!" (No problem!), as they'd often say. About half way through my term there I also got involved in health related work which, with the enthusiasm of many local youth and two local doctors, eventually evolved into an out-patient clinic and various eye-cataract operations.

Now that I have arrived back in Ireland much of the experience seems distant and hazy. But Pakistan did leave a deep impression on me. Along with the pleasant memories, there are others of the sufferings that some of my friends in Lahore endure; yet even the latter often faded somewhat in the midst of the energy and ingenuity employed to make the best of it all. Ultimately, I'm left with more questions than answers. But then answers are probably to be found through day to day living rather than by searching for the right words.