

A Short Biography of the Indus River based on personal observations

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Abstract

River Indus is one of the great rivers of the world. It originates in the Kailas Mountains of western Tibet at 17,000 feet and after passing through Ladakh, the Indian-controlled Kashmir, it enters Pakistan and remains a Pakistani river for 2,000 miles until emptying into the Arabian Sea near the southern port city of Karachi. The Indus has been a witness to major historic upheavals that unfolded along its banks throughout history. It saw the emergence and decline of major empires and in the process shaped the people who live in towns and villages on the river.

At different time the Indus has nurtured Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam along its banks. Buddhism is still prevalent in Tibet and in Ladakh. Islam prevails along its banks in Pakistan. The Indus spawned Islamic Sufi traditions in what is now Pakistan. The poetry of Sufi saints still resonates with and stirs people. Some of the great epic poems in various languages were written in the backdrop of the Indus or its branches. This essay is based on historic accounts of the Indus River. It also contains personal observations of the author during four expeditions that his Team Indus carried out on the river in Pakistan and at its source in Kailash Mountains of western Tibet.

Keywords: Sengge Kanbab, Alexandar of Macedon, Indus Water Treaty, Kalabagh, Kanishka, Indus Delta

1. Introduction

Rivers have always fascinated mankind. They have spawned great civilizations, nurtured fabulous cities and occasionally devastated them when more water flowed through than their banks could contain. They also created exquisitely beautiful landscapes. And they made and remade history. Indus is one of the longest rivers in Asia. During its course to the sea, it is known by many different names such as

Tibetan, Sindhu, Mehran, Attock, and Abasin. It spawned one of the greatest river civilizations in history. Around 3300 BCE, a unique civilization flourished along the banks of the Indus in the present-day Sindh province of Pakistan. The achievements of the Indus Valley inhabitants still resonate and dazzle.

I have a personal relationship with the river. I have fished and hunted along its banks and got to know and love the river. As an 8-year-old boy hunting with my elder brothers on the Kabul River, a major tributary of the Indus, I would often ask the villagers as to where the river flows to. They would motion in the direction of downstream and mention Nowshera or Jehangira, two towns downstream from Peshawar. An idea took hold of my eight-year-old brain: I need to find out where the river eventually ends up.

In high school and college, I learned about the Kabul River, its confluence with the Indus at Attock and Indus's southerly journey toward the Arabian Sea. While the logic of acquired knowledge about the river was always there, my previously 8-year-old brain still insisted I see it myself. After all, some books still mention Lake Manasarovar as the source of the Indus River as well as the source of three other great rivers of Subcontinental India. A 'fact' that was debunked more than a century ago.

I undertook four expeditions on the Indus River starting in 1987 when our Team Indus was able to cover the river from Attock to the Arabian Sea. In the subsequent three expeditions, we covered the remaining parts of the river in Pakistan and then at its source in Western Tibet.

2. The Birth of a Great River

Indus was born out of a geologic cataclysm. At one time, some 60 million years (my) ago, there was a sea in the area north of India. The sea in geological jargon is named as the Neo-Tethys. Then, through geological upheavals, the Indian plate drifted northward to ultimately collide a series of intra-oceanic island arcs and the Eurasian plate. Some 55 my ago, the Neo-Tethys disappeared and the Indian plate continued subducting under the Tibetan plate, eventually resulting in the rise of the three great Asian mountain ranges, the Himalaya, Hindu Kush and Karakoram. The continental collision is essentially also responsible for the rise of the great Tibetan Plateau and its high peaks such as the Kailas, although it has been suggested that some uplift in Tibet may be older than the India-Asia collision. The Indus River is intricately linked to uplift of the Tibetan Plateau. It may indeed be geologically ancient, with origin possibly dating back to over 40 my. Continued subduction, active tectonics, uplift, erosion and sedimentation over millions of

years resulted in significant changes in its course. According to some recent studies, the Indus River system in its current form may have been active for about 5 my, as evidenced by the sedimentological record which also provides information on its role in shaping the landscape and ecosystems of the region.

Remnants of the ancient sea can still be seen in Brahmaputra and the Indus. These two rivers pursue a course in opposite directions but their origin from the ancient sea can still be found in the form of blind dolphins and thin-snout crocodile called gharial in the two river systems. A thousand miles apart, these animals now inhabit the lower reaches of the Indus and Brahmaputra Rivers. They are not found anywhere else in the world.

3. A River with Different Personalities

Indus has its moods and its temperaments. People who live on its banks know the river and in many ways the river shapes them. A cursory look at the head gear people wear along the Indus tell a story of changes along the river. In the northern reaches, people wear caps made from woolen pattu cloth. Downstream, close to the frontier province of Khyber, Pakhtunkhwa people wear distinctive turbans that are dome-shaped head gear (kulla) with a few yards of yarn wrapped around it. In Punjab, they wear turbans without the headgear and further down in Sindh the turban changes into a cap with the front cut out in the shape of a mehrab or prayer niche one sees in a mosque. A similar transition happens in the dresses people wear along its banks.

4. Birthplace of the Indus

In the Kailas mountains of western Tibet, the Indus is a lonely stream originating from the lap of the earth at the base of a non-descript low hill at 17,000 feet. There in the high pastures, it flows meekly and without any fanfare. It nurtures the nomads and their beasts as well as the wild animals and birds such as kiang (wild asses), antelopes, wild yaks, swans and black-necked cranes.

As it gathers speed and water from dozens of tributaries it runs full when it reaches the town of Ali also known as Sengghe Kanbab. In Tibet, sometimes two separate places bear the same name. In addition to Ali being called Sengghe Kanbab, the place where Indus starts is also called Sengghe Kanbab (literally the Mouth of the Lion). The two places are separated by more than a hundred miles of hilly terrain.

5. The Holy Mountain, Mount Kailas

Sixty miles south of the beginning of the Indus is located Mount Kailas, the religious epicenter of Tibetan Buddhists and Hindus from around the world (Fig. 1a). Pilgrims perform circumambulation or Kora around the mountain. It is an arduous feat going up and down the mountain passes, trudging through harsh landscape to complete 32 miles long ritual. While most pilgrims walk the route, some deeply devoted Buddhists crawl the route on their stomachs. It is perhaps the ultimate expression of religious devotion.

Located 20-miles south of Mount Kails, Lake Manasarovar is one of the most beautiful lakes in the world. It is also the holiest fresh-water lake. It is, according to Tibetan beliefs, the birthplace of the four great rivers of the Indian Subcontinent. Like the four points of a compass, the Indus issues from the mouth of the lion (hence the name Lion River) from north of the lake, Karnali, a major branch of Ganges from the mouth of a peacock in the east, Sutlej from the west from the mouth of an elephant and Brahmaputra from the mouth of a horse from the south of the lake.

It was left to Sven Hedin, a Swedish explorer to survey the lake in 1907. Having found no rivers originating from the lake, he ventured north of Kailas Mountain to discover the source of the Indus. During this unauthorized quest, he was chased by the Tibetan authorities. He also discovered the origins of the three other great rivers of the Indian Subcontinent that are within a radius of 60 miles (Fig. 1b, 1c, 1d)

In the 1980s, an American hiker by the name of Belleza made a solo trek to the source of the Indus. In our quest to the source of the Indus we were literally following in the footsteps of Hedin and Belleza (Fig. 1e, 1f; 2a, 2b).

6. Ladakh and Baltistan

After flowing through Ladakh for 150 miles, the Indus enters Pakistani-controlled Kashmir near Kargil. For man to overcome geological obstacles is rather easy but political barriers are impossible to overcome. In our expedition to the source of the Indus, we followed the Indus close to where it enters Ladakh in the Indian Controlled Kashmir. We would have liked to have kept traveling on the continuation of the famous Lhasa-Skardu trade route to Skardu or floated down the river to reach Skardu. However, political barriers reinforced with bullets were impossible to overcome. Unfortunately, we were not allowed to trek the river in Ladakh.



Figure 1. (a) Team Indus Yak caravan at Mount Kailas in western Tibet; (b) Caravan climbing a hill; (c) Team Indus camp in high Indus valley; (d) Caravan in high Indus valley; (e) Team members in prayer on completing the trek to the source of the river. The ditch on the right is the beginning of the Indus; (f) Team members displaying the flags of the US and Explorers Club at the source. The small puddle in the foreground is the begging of the Indus River.

After traversing for about 150 miles through Ladakh, Indus enters Baltistan, Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. In its passage through Ladakh, the Indus receives two of its major tributaries, Zaskar and Shyok rivers. To cover Indus in Baltistan we had to travel against the flow of the river and come up to Skardu from Gilgit. We then continued towards the Line of Control, a de facto international border between Indian and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir (Fig. 2c).

There is an uneasy truce between Indian and Pakistani soldiers on the line of control. They wave to each other but there is no interaction between them. Across the river from Pakistani post, the famous Lhasa-Skardu trade route is clearly visible. The route is disrupted at the line of control for half a kilometer. According to the officer in charge at the Pakistani post, the route was intentionally disrupted by blasting it with heavy artillery and bombs at the time of the Partition in 1947. The fabled route that connected Lhasa in the east with Skardu and Gilgit in the west ran for 1500 miles connecting eastern Tibet with India.

7. The Skardu Gorge

The Indus flows wide and serene in Skardu plateau before entering the Skardu gorge where it is hemmed in by high mountains creating a landscape that is hauntingly beautiful and scary (Fig. 2d). The eerie and haunting landscape has affected all first-time visitors. In 1891, E.F. Knight, one of the first Englishmen to venture into the Skardu gorge wrote, “The Indus here rushes between stupendous defiles and for leagues at a time one sees nothing but almost perpendicular crags between the foaming river and the sky.”

A ribbon of narrow road follows the mountain contours with the Indus fighting its way down into the valley over and around cathedral-size boulders. Climbing up the narrow ribbon does not instill confidence when one sees carcasses of jeeps and other small vehicles that have hurtled down to the river in the past. Traveling through the Skardu Gorge requires nerves of steel and a brave face. However, the river spreads out and flows slowly in Skardu plateau. It is really picturesque (Fig. 2e).

8. Karakorum Highway

Near Jaglot, the Indus receives another significant tributary, the Gilgit River. From there on the Indus flows unhampered by obstacles due south for 1400 miles to its meeting with the Arabian Sea. Passing through Kohistan’s rugged mountains the river does not have to tussle with the confining mountains but flows fast and steady creating white water patches along the way. Here the river is virtually a gutter on the roof of the world (Fig. 2f).



Figure 2. (a) Team leader with his mount; (b) Sketch map of the route Team Indus took from Mount Kailas to the source; (c) No Man's Land at the Line of Control in Kashmir seen from the Pakistani side. The line on the mountain on right-hand side is the continuation of Lhasa-Ladakh Trade Route; (d) Team Indus camp in Skardu Gorge; (e) Indus in Skardu; (f) The 'gutter' at the roof of the world. Aerial view of the Indus.

In 1962, Pakistan, with the help of Chinese engineers undertook to build the Karakorum Highway along the Indus River through the Karakorum Mountains. It follows roughly the southern branch of the fabled Silk Road that stretched from Xian in east China to Europe in the west for 4000 miles. It was this southern extension of the Silk Road that pilgrims and traders traveled to India from China. The progress was measured not in miles but in feet and yards. A journey that once took months to complete can now, thanks to the new highway, be done in one day (Fig. 3a).

9. Tarbela, the largest earth-filled dam in the world

In 1968, at Tarbela, the biggest earth-filled dam was constructed on the Indus to generate electricity and bring arid land under irrigation. The dam was built according to the Indus Basin Treaty between India and Pakistan. The dam is located over an area prone to seismic activity. Some scientists have spoken about the possibility of a major earthquake destroying the dam and unleashing the water from the lake. It is estimated that a wall of water 30 feet high would devastate the land downstream and reverse the flow of water in Indus tributaries. Something like this has happened in the 19th century when a major landslide in Baltistan blocked the river. When the river finally broke through, it devastated the land hundreds of miles downstream reversing the flow in all its tributaries. A woman was found in Kabul River near Nowshera who was wearing strange clothes and spoke a language no one understood. She had been carried by flood waters and somehow survived the ordeal.

10. Taxila

Located 15 miles from the Indus near its eastern bank, the city of Taxila flourished before the Common Era as a trading center and the seat of one of the earliest (if not the earliest) universities in the world. It was founded, according to the Indian Hindu epic Ramayana, by Bharata, the younger brother of the Hindu god Rama. The Hindu epic Mahabharata was first recited here and according to scholars those scriptures were added on to in Taxila. It was also in Taxila that Panini (a resident of Chota Lahore in Swabi), a scholar “and Father of Linguistics”, wrote the first grammar of Sanskrit language somewhere between 7th and 4th century BCE.

11. Alexander and the Indus

In 327 BCE, Alexander of Macedon came to India via Afghanistan over Nawa Pass through the Hindu Kush Mountains and was confronted with the Indus blocking his way. His army crossed the river near present-day Swabi and marched on

towards Jehlum where he fought a pitched battle with the local king Raja Porus. Historians have challenged the one-sided account of that battle where Alexander is portrayed as humiliating Porus in the battle. While he had set out to conquer the world, a rebellion among his ranks forced him to abandon that idea and he decided to return to Macedon. He and his army had been on the road for ten years. [More about Alexander's retreat from India later in this essay.]

Below Tarbela, the river flows fast and steady and within 50 km it receives the Kabul River near Attock (Fig. 3e). It was here that the Moghul Emperor Akbar built a magnificent fort on the eastern bank in 1582 (Fig. 3b). Its strategic location and the Indus acting as the formidable barrier gave Akbar the ability to control the main trade route between Afghanistan and the Indian plains.

12. My family connection with the Indus

In our voyage on the Indus from Attock to the Arabian Sea, I was reminded of my family connection to the Indus. My paternal grandfather Syed Sher Shah, a physician in the service of the British India Government, was posted in Paharpur near Dera Ismail Khan. Every two years he would bring his family for a visit to Peshawar. They would travel by land to Peshawar for 250 miles. The return visit from Peshawar was on a cabin boat they boarded near Peshawar on the Kabul River that took them to Indus and then south to Dera Ismail Khan. It was an arduous journey taking up to two weeks.

While we traveled on rubber rafts and had reasonable accommodations on our night stops, I vividly imagined my grandfather's family composed of a servant or two and burqa-clad women of his household roughing it out on the Indus. It was a learning experience for me and my two sons who accompanied me on this and subsequent expeditions. To connect with the river through family history was uplifting (Fig. 3c, 3d).

13. Gandhara Empire

In the first century of the Common Era, this entire area was part of the vast Gandhara Empire that comprised present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, western India and southern China. Kanishka ruled the empire from his capital in Peshawar. In Peshawar, just outside the present-day eastern wall of the city, he built a magnificent stupa that according to contemporary records was the highest structure in the then-known world that including India and China. During an exploration of the site in 1909, an American archeologist, Brainard Spooner, discovered the stupa and a bronze reliquary casket containing ash and bone fragments of Lord Buddha

(Fig. 3f). While the contents of the small reliquary casket were gifted to Burma (now Myanmar) by the British India Government, the bronze reliquary (measuring 7 inches by 5 inches) is in Peshawar Museum. A replica of the casket is in the British Museum in London.

14. Chinese Pilgrims on the Indus

Buddhism was born in India. It spread via the Silk Route to China and beyond. That great 'highway' was the main conduit where religions, art, diseases, and ideas spread in each direction. Chinese Buddhist pilgrims traveled to India to visit holy places and collect sacred texts. In their southward journey from China, they had to scale with their pack animals the Karakorum Mountains to reach the plains of India. Many frightened animals would slip and fall hundreds of feet into the churning waters of the Indus far below. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang visited Peshawar in 629 CE and left a detailed account of the city and the Stupa.

15. Kalabagh

Downstream from Attock, the river flows unrestricted by confining mountains, but soon near Kalabagh, the river is again hemmed in by mountains. This segment of the river and the mountains create one of the most beautiful examples of mountain grandeur (Fig. 4b).

There was a proposal to build a hydroelectric dam at Kalabagh, but instead of taking the proposal at its merit, it became a political football between Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh provinces. Politicians in KP argued that the resulting lake would devastate agriculture in their province. It was estimated that its effects will be felt as far up as 150-miles because of water logging. The other objection, raised by the Sindh province, was that the dam would drastically reduce available water for the needs of that province, and would have deleterious effects on the Indus Delta. The fate of the dam hangs in limbo.

16. The gold diggers of the Indus

In the Kalabagh region and at the confluence of the Indus-Kabul rivers, there are nomads who extract gold from the sand of the Indus River, traditionally through panning. One sees them, men and women, on the riverbank with washboard, pans and water pitchers sifting through the sand for the tiny particles of gold. Herodotus wrote about



Figure 3. (a) Indus in the Karakoram Mountains; (b) Attock Fort; (c) Boat stuck on a sand bar; (d) Team Indus boats; (e) Indus downstream from Tarbela Dam in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province; (f) Rendering of Kanishka's Stupa in Peshawar in 2nd century CE.

the Indus and its gold as a secondhand account that he learned from Skylax. The latter was sent to India from Persia to track Indus to the sea. Herodotus says of that voyage:

“...Wishing to know where River Indos...emptied into the sea, he (King Darius of Persia) sent a number of men among them Skulax of Karuanda, to sail down the river. They started from the city of Kaspaturiosand in the country of Paktuke, and sailed down the river to the east and the sunrise to the sea.”

Herodotus, Book 4, 44, 486-420BCE

They most likely started their journey on Kabul River from the present-day Peshawar, going east and then south all the way to the sea.

17. A good Samaritan

In the plains of Punjab, freed of mountainous constraints, the Indus spreads out and flows leisurely. It meanders and often changes course, taking with it temporary mud houses that farmers built to tend to seasonal agriculture crops. It was here in southern Punjab that we came across a good Samaritan and his unique gift of hospitality.

One day, because of the low water in the river and an abundance of fishing nets, our journey on the river had slowed down considerably, forcing us to make an unscheduled night stop on a dark and desolate spot on the riverbank. There was no sign of habitation for miles. Then, we saw an older man walking in the dark towards the riverbank. Asked if there were any nearby villages where we could buy food, he said the nearest village was a few miles away. He invited us to accompany him to his home which was about a mile away from the opposing bank. We thanked him for his kind gesture and told him we were just too tired to partake of his hospitality. After about two hours the man materialized out of darkness bearing a basket of freshly cooked flat bread and a bowl of boiled vegetables. It would not be an exaggeration to say we tore into the food. When he was ready to leave, we offered to pay but he refused to accept any money. He invoked an ancient Islamic practice that says it is incumbent upon every believer to feed the hungry and wayfarers. He was just doing his duty, he said, and left with the empty basket and bowl leaving us totally bewildered.

18. Panjnad River

At Mithankot in Punjab, the Indus receives Panjnad River which brings cumulative waters of the five rivers of Punjab. They are Jehlum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej Rivers. While on the trek to the source of the river in Tibet we saw a large

glacier with a sharp edge clinging to a mountain. We realized that the glacier drained into the Sutlej and Indus Rivers. On one side of the sharp edge was the catchment for Sutlej and the other side was for Indus. These waters travel for a thousand miles to Mithankot where Punjnad meets Indus and together they travel towards the Arabian sea (Fig. 4a).

19. The Mound of the Dead

In the southern reaches of the river, close to the city of Larkana are located the ruins of Moenjodaro, commonly known as the Mound of the Dead. First excavated in 1922 by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, the city was built on a grid with adequate drainage and sewer disposal. The streets were wide with garbage-disposable cisterns located along the streets. Houses had latrines and bathing facilities. The streets had niches for the placement of streetlamps. Excavated jewelry and toys found were exquisitely crafted.

It is amazing that the inhabitants of the Indus Valley did not leave great monuments to their kings like the people of the Nile. Instead, they left examples of a planned city where various classes of people lived harmoniously. No one knows why the site was abandoned. It is speculated that the changing course of the Indus destroyed the intricate irrigation system thus forcing people to gradually abandon the city.

20. A chance meeting with the great Thor Heyerdahl

It was here at Moenjodaro in 1988 that we ran into the great Norwegian explorer and experimental archeologist Thor Heyerdahl. He was there to shoot a documentary on Moenjodaro. He is famous for crossing the Pacific Ocean in 1947 from South America to Tuamotu Islands. He traveled over 5000 miles aboard a primitive raft and proved that in the ancient world, long-distance ocean travel was feasible. His other voyages proved that contacts between widely separated ancient people existed. In 1970, he led Ra II expedition when he sailed from the west coast of Africa to Barbados in a papyrus reed boat. Mr. Heyerdahl was affable, charming and more interested in our expedition than his own exploits. Compared to what he had accomplished as an explorer, ours was a picnic walk through a park. At the insistence of his crew that they had only a few hours of daylight, he said a reluctant goodbye to us. That brief meeting in the ancient ruins of Moenjodaro was the highlight of our trip down the Indus. Documentary of Team Indus Expeditions is made by the Public Broadcasting Service of America in 2005 (Fig. 4c).

21. Indus Delta

After Sukkur, one comes to the city of Thatta. Here one sees tell-tale signs of the Indus Delta. Beyond that, the river divides into an ever-changing network of canals and creeks. Ocean has been slowly encroaching the land. Ketī Bandar, a village once located away from the coast, is now on the ocean. It was once the vegetable basket of Karachi. The Indus brings less water to the sea now because of many dams and barrages upstream. Hence the ocean has been creeping inland.

22. A toast to Poseidon

Alexander the Great, after his troops rebelled, decided to take the sea route back to Macedon. His army moved along the eastern bank of the river. In the delta, he established a temporary naval base for his army. He boarded a boat and made his way to the sea where he sacrificed bulls and threw their carcasses into the sea. Also, he poured libations into the sea to invoke the blessings of Poseidon, the Lord of the Sea and protector of seafarers. In the delta, using local timber, his engineers and craftsmen constructed hundreds of large flat-bottom boats for their journey back to Macedon.

Our conclusion of the Indus Odyssey was not as dramatic. After getting lost in the delta for a few hours at night, we finally found our bearings and the next day, with ships blaring their horns to welcome us, we entered Port Qasim, our destination.

23. Navigation on the Indus

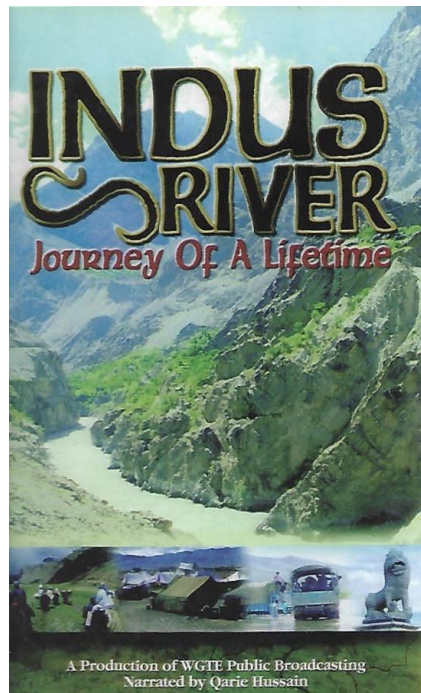
From time to time, questions have been raised about large-scale navigation on the Indus, especially moving cargo over long distances. Other than the shifting currents in the Indus, the main impediment would be man-made obstacles in the form of dams and barrages. Currently, there are three dams and six barrages across the flow of the river. Navigation could be done in stretches of the Indus where water is plentiful, and the dams and barrages do not hold back the river. Between Attock and Kalabagh, the river runs full but is hemmed in by rigid mountains on both sides. But, in the plains of Punjab the river meanders and shifts. Navigation under those conditions is difficult. To maintain a useable channel regular dredging would be needed. One good example, from not too distant past, is crossing the Indus between Dera Ismail Khan and Darya Khan, two cities across the river between Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and Punjab. In summer, when the water is plentiful, the crossing was done with a steamer. It took almost eight hours to do the crossing. The steamer would go upstream and downstream, zig-zagging the river to avoid sandbars. A detailed report of the depth survey done by our team was published by the National Transport Research Center.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 4. (a) Boat bridge at Mithankot; (b) A cargo boat on the Indus; (c) Documentary of Team Indus Expeditions made by the Public Broadcasting Service of America in 2005.

24. Saints on the River

Like many great rivers of the world, the Indus has inspired people living along its banks and on its major tributaries to create acquisitive poetry that connects people,

common folks, to the true reality. I do not know much about the Tibetan poetic traditions but within Pakistan from Baltistan to the southern fringes of Sindh innumerable Sufi poetic traditions flourished. These poetic traditions go back to 13th century when Sufi saints preached the gospel of inclusion and had in their circle of disciples Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. Lal Shabaz Qalandar from Sehvin Sharif inspired the poetry and music of a 19th-century devotional poem ‘Dama Dam Mast Qalandar’, that still resonates with people and drives them to ecstasy. In the plains of Punjab, there were the likes of Bahahuddin Zakriya, Waris Shah, and Khwaja Ghulam Farid. Another saint-poet of 13th century, Baba Farid, who wrote in Punjabi and some of his devotional poetry is part of the Sikh holy book Guru Granth Sahib. In the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, two poet-philosophers lived near the Kabul River. Khushal Khan Khattak and Rahman Baba were inspired by their surroundings and made commentaries in verse that have remained relevant for the past three centuries. And then there were the epic poems that were written along the Indus. Unlike the devotional poetry of the above-mentioned poet-saints, these epic poems addressed bravery, loss and lament and unfulfilled love. Among the epic poems are Sassi-Pannu, Heer-Ranjha, Adam Khan-Durkhane, and Yusaf Khan-Sher Bano. Sohni-Mahiwal is an ancient tale that has come down through generations. Abdul Latif Bhittai, a poet-saint from Sindh in the 18th century wrote the story in verse. Sohni, a girl who was married against her will, had a lover who lived across the Chenab River. She would swim the river every night buoyed by a clay pitcher. One night her mother-in-law replaced the baked clay pitcher with an unbaked one. While Mahiwal waited on the other bank, Sohni’s unbaked pitcher dissolved in the middle of the river, and she perished. Here is a poem by the Pakistani Pashtun poet Sadiqullah Khan that gives glimpses into the history of the Indus River:

25. That Boat-Bridge on Indus

Aged Indus on thine fettered shore
Down the plains the serpent roves,
Whilst the gods up-live, yours is
From the sand-bed, a blind dolphin.

The boat-bridge, like a steed’s back
Saddled for ride, or a swinging cradle;
On the sheepskin blown afloat
The milkmen to the city vie the bank.

Every wave is filled with rubies

Water perfumed with musk,
From the river waft air of ambergris
Thus spake Shah Latif of Bhit.

What else is Indian, from your name,
Continent, an ocean, an Indies, - misnomers
Christopher Columbus, mistook
For the world he new discovered.

Herodotus fond, the Macedonian down,
Alexander Burnes, upstream
To the black-eyed damsels,
Or a Ranjit Singh his armies raised.

Vedas begin on your edge,
Sohni drowned by the treacherous wave:
While fed the hungry, fertile lands,
Water and wealth, go hand in hand.

While on your dried stream,
I behold your past, a love, though
Ancient gone, and by the sunset in desert
Once, it is said, you had flown henceforth.

Empire mighty, fabled loves,
On a withered time, I yet no mourn,
But as you surge, like my veins carry blood
Through my whole, - but alas! That boat-bridge
Could you once, tie for me, my last wish on thee?

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