

Geckos & Guns: The Pakistan Years is the latest installment of Sharon Bazant's riveting travel memoirs. Following on the heels of her 2019, Nine Years in Bangkok, this new title Geckos & Guns tells of the time before Bangkok.

Geckos & Guns: THE PAKISTAN YEARS

By Sharon Bazant

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Geckos & Guns

THE PAKISTAN YEARS



Sharon Bazant

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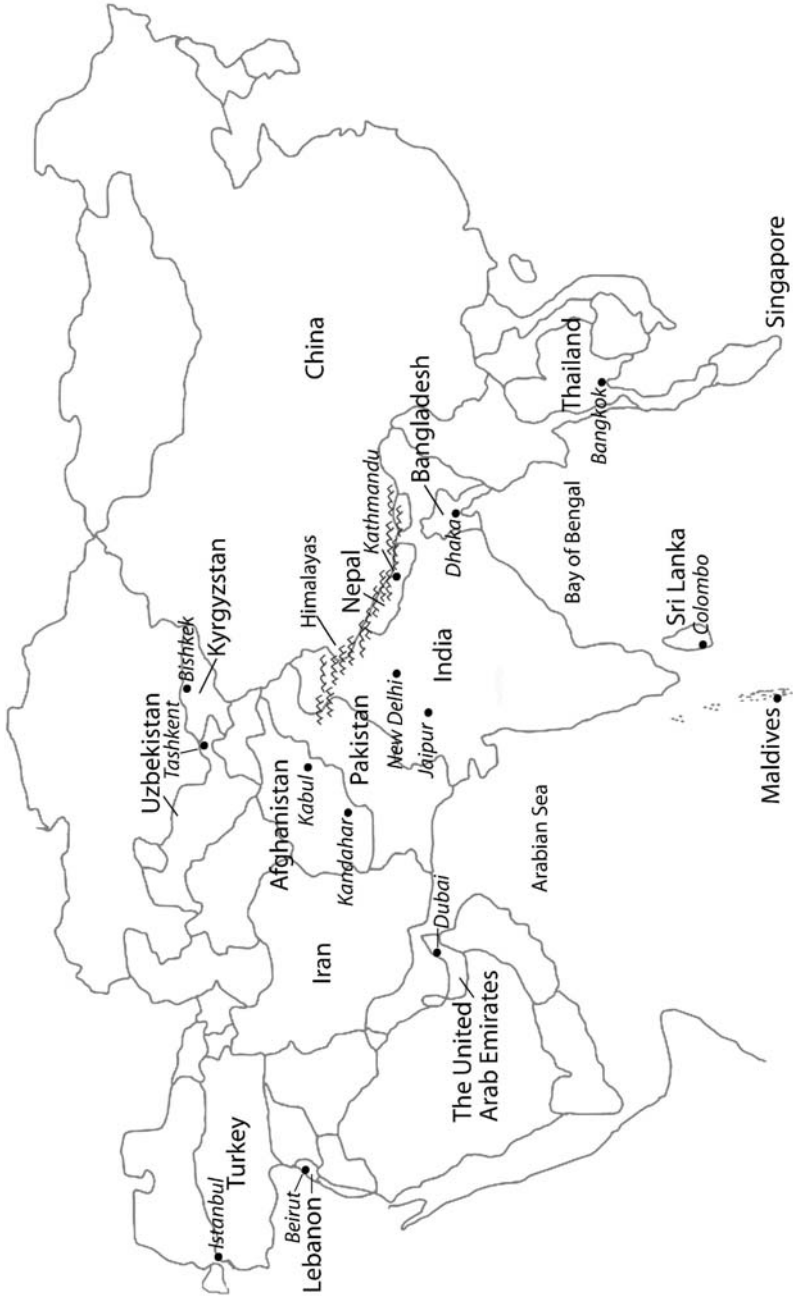


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CHAPTER 3—MADAM OF THE HOUSE

After the initial excitement and the first blows of culture shock wore off, we needed to get organized—hire staff, order furniture, get the house in order. Wayne and the kids were occupied with demanding challenges of their own at work and school. So, the administration of all things “household” fell to me.

Ordering furniture was easy and mostly fun. We drew pictures of what we envisioned, found reputable tradesmen to create handmade pieces for a song compared to prices in Canada, and eagerly awaited the date of delivery. Then came the hard part—the waiting, the calling, and the stalling in endless cycles.

We eventually had to accept that things happen when they happen. I spent hours of every day just waiting for some *thing* to happen. This went against every fiber of my Canadian mindset. However, I needed to hold things together for the family. I felt like a bridge stretched over a bottomless chasm of the unknown—taut, rigid, and weighted down all at once. It would be quite a while before I understood the value of letting go.

Nevertheless, I was propelled forward by the next duty on my list, the hiring of servants—yes, servants. Not a Canadian term by any means, but that is what domestic workers were called in Pakistan in the ‘90s. I wasn’t used to being called Madam or *Memsahib* either but, again, this was the custom in our new country. Wayne was called *Sahib* or Sir and he was considered the undisputed head of the family by all. This dated back to the days of the colonial subcontinent, and the practice was still alive and well in the 1990s.

We learned early on that domestic staff was a necessity. Why? Well, for starters, we lived in a 7000 square foot home! Islamabad was a dusty town in a subtropical climate with no public bathrooms. Interior spaces needed to be kept clean for the sake of everyone’s

health. Every day the floors had to be cleaned with a solution of Dettol and water to get rid of dirt and bacteria brought in from outside and to protect us from invasion by bugs and pests. All surfaces, ornaments, etc., had to be cleaned and wiped down daily as well. The kitchen and the bathrooms, but particularly the kitchen, had to be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected at least once a day.

We clearly needed a *bearer*. His (household staff in Pakistan were primarily men) job would be to clean the house, help serve food, and assist in washing dishes. It would have been simple if we could have hired one or even two people to perform all the tasks in our home, but we quickly realized that would be impossible, since until 1947, Pakistan had been part of India, and the customs and culture of those bygone days hadn't disappeared. The *caste system*⁶ was a prime example. This practice originated in Hinduism and was even more rigidly set in place during the British Raj.

At the time of *Partition*⁷, when Pakistan was created, thousands of Muslims migrated to East (now Bangladesh) or West Pakistan and large sectors of the Hindu population migrated to what is now India. Many expected that Muslim Pakistan wouldn't uphold the caste system. However, it was deeply entrenched in their culture. So, while officially, this system no longer existed, in reality, it was very much observed. Duties and jobs were defined by where a person fit in the rigid social order. Because Pakistan was primarily a Muslim society, Christians tended to be the poorest and lowest class in the caste system, having originated from the "untouchable" caste. Many of them lived in colonies surrounded by high walls, and they were most often employed as cleaners, sweepers, etc.—taking care of the "dirty" work.

Sometimes Christians could be cooks and bearers as well. Foreigners would relegate them to these positions when they

⁶ The caste system is a class structure determined by a person's birth.

⁷ Partition refers to the bloody 1947 division of India into separate nations—Muslim and non-Muslim.

recognized a worker's potential. Conversely, Muslims would never take on jobs such as cleaning toilets or sewers. Those occupations were for Christians exclusively, because Christians occupied the lowest strata, but everyone—Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs—was restricted by the social order. Businesses, trades, and services were handed down in families for generations. If someone was a brass *wallah*⁸ then that was his lot in life. Even if he had the intelligence and the resources to procure a law degree, he could never rise above the station of a brass salesman. This would hold true for generation after generation. *Dhobis*⁹, *rickshaw*¹⁰ drivers, *chai wallahs*¹¹, these jobs weren't just designated for a lifetime, but for all time. For domestic staff, this meant that roles were strictly prescribed. A cook oversaw the kitchen, a bearer was charged with cleaning indoor spaces, a driver took care of the car—each responsibility required hiring someone who could fulfill that duty according to ancient designations. No one could step outside of these parameters. A guard's duty was to open and close the front gate; it would be degrading and shameful for him to be asked to sweep the driveway.

Considering all this, I embarked on the daunting task of hiring a minimum of seven people. Our family in Canada was under the impression that we lived a privileged life of being waited on hand and foot. On the contrary, I quickly came to learn that looking after the household staff was much like overseeing a small class of ninth graders with learning difficulties!

And so, I continued to write my “to hire” list. For outside spaces, we had to have a sweeper. Driveways, walkways, and patios quickly accumulated dust and grime if not cleaned regularly. Gardening was

⁸ A wallah is a person who has a specific business or service.

⁹ Dhobis are laundrymen.

¹⁰ A Rickshaw is a three-wheeled cart.

¹¹ A Chai wallah is a tea seller.

another matter, and for that, we needed a *mali*¹² who would look after our little patch of garden, cut the grass, prune the trees, plant flowers, and generally attend to the upkeep of our yard.

When I asked why we couldn't work in the garden ourselves, plant vegetable seeds or whatever, I was told that, as foreigners, we didn't understand how to grow and maintain plants in this new environment. And besides that, we might have the bad luck of encountering deadly snakes as we were blissfully working in the soil. In looking back, I think we were dramatically oversold on this narrative so that our staff could take over the garden, which they happily did. The garden patch became the permanent home of their staple choices, okra and mint.

The most important position in the house was that of the cook. He not only shopped for groceries, cleaned the food, prepared meals, and scrubbed the kitchen but he was also considered the *de facto* head of staff. Why was this a full-time job? In order to understand, we needed a crash course in shopping at local markets and food preparation.

Outdoor food markets in Pakistan were a visual kaleidoscope. One minute we would be tantalized by pyramids of golden spices and the next confronted with stacks of fly blown dates and sweets. Filthy rags swatted at bugs and flies and fought the perpetual dust that settled on everything. The dissonant calls of ubiquitous crows were a constant background to the shouting, haggling, and bargaining of the jostling masses. Strains of Bollywood music blasting from the competing stalls completed the raucous chorus.

Our spotless, spacious, brightly lit local Safeway had been replaced with Friday Market, appropriately named as it was only set up on Fridays. Tomatoes, cucumbers, and all manner of seasonal produce—nothing was available in Pakistan outside of growing season—were displayed on bits of colourful cloth laid out on the ground as far as the eye could see. Fish and chickens were

¹² A *mali* is a gardener.

slaughtered and eviscerated, according to customer selection, in prominent corners of this vast open-air market. Imagine breathing in an odorous mixture of raw fish, entrails, and rotting fruit.

A daily shopping alternative was Covered Market where fresh fruits and vegetables were stacked and arranged indoors. It wasn't as crowded or hectic as some of the outdoor markets, but it did have a population of fat rats that skittered in and out of vendor's stalls.

The meat section of Covered Market particularly seized our attention. It was the single greatest reason that Julie suddenly became a vegetarian. Animals were butchered and hung all day in the blistering heat, quickly becoming malodourous flycatchers. Goats were skinned and hung with testicles prominent to assure customers that they were buying cuts of meat from the preferred male. The *coup de grace* was the butcher. He sat on a raised platform thick with blood and gore, slicing raw chunks of meat with a cutting blade between his feet. He always had a smile for passersby.

Sterilized, freeze-wrapped, Canadian supermarkets were a thing of the past. With no time to adjust, we were now confronted by the earthy and often bloody source from whence came our nourishment. Eventually, wandering these markets, heady with the warm-blood scent of ripe meat mingled with the wafting stench of open sewers and rancid smoking oils rising from vendor's deep-fried *samosas*¹³ became a way of life for us.

We never got used to the beggars, often at the entrances to the markets, dressed in filthy rags, pointing to massive goiters on their necks or open sores or missing limbs, imploring passersby for money. We were told that many of them were drug addicts or subject to the control of organized criminals. I didn't know what to believe. There was just so much unrelenting poverty.

After a few weeks of searching, we found other stores tucked away here and there—a little shop that sold Laughing Cow cheese,

¹³ Samosas are fried pastries with a savoury filling.

contraband items like pork hidden at the bottom of a freezer, and Movenpick ice cream. These special treats delighted us beyond words.

Hiring a cook to help with this weekly grocery shopping had to be a number one priority. He would be knowledgeable in navigating the market culture and adept at bargaining. We were hopeless as we had never encountered this bargaining game before. Nothing in Pakistan had a final price tag. Even more important, the cook had the responsibility of cleaning all the food once he arrived home with the groceries. This was a massive job. In Pakistan food was grown using *night soil*¹⁴ as fertilizer. Also, general standards of cleanliness fell well below what was needed for optimal digestive health. As a result, rigorous and lengthy cleaning methods were required for all produce purchased in the markets. This was the routine: First, fruits and vegetables were soaked and scrubbed in regular soapy water and well-rinsed. Then they had to be soaked in a solution of bleach and filtered water. After that, each item was rinsed again with filtered water and set on the counter to dry. The final step was bagging and sealing all items for storage in the refrigerator. Meat, fish, and chicken were immediately placed in the freezer to kill any bacteria.

Ensuring a source of clean water was a process as well. Water-borne illness was prevalent and bottled water wasn't readily available or to be trusted if you could find it. So, we bought a shiny new five-gallon pot. Every morning it was filled with water and set to boil for 20 minutes. After cooling and setting aside some jugs for the refrigerator, this water was used for drinking and cooking. Replacing rusted pipes and keeping the rooftop water tank clean were also part of the efforts required to ensure a good water supply. A lot could and did go wrong. We came to accept that.

Cleaning produce and boiling water added up to hours of work in the kitchen. And that didn't even include the actual preparation or cooking of the food and disinfecting the kitchen a couple of times a

¹⁴ Night soil refers to the use of human excrement as fertilizer.

day. We also had teenage children and our son was a bottomless eating pit. Many hours were spent baking and preparing treats for them. In addition to all of this, the cook, as head of the servants, was responsible for listening to any issues brought forward by others on staff and bringing those concerns to us. The lesson here: whoever we hired as our cook would be pivotal to the health and happiness of our home.

I had two more jobs to fill as well—guards, both nighttime and daytime, and *dhobi*. The guards were charged with protecting the house and opening and closing the gate for vehicles. The *dhobi* was responsible for doing the laundry twice a week.

As I look back, I realize that it was just short of a miracle that we found people to fill all these positions. Most expats had far more support than we did when they moved to a new posting. They occupied the houses of their predecessors which came with an already tried and tested staff. Embassy personnel lived on protected compounds for the most part and the American Embassy and Canadian High Commission had expansive grounds complete with swimming pools, clubhouses, bars, and restaurants. International School staff had designated housing and longer-term staff members to help new teachers get settled.

We, on the other hand, were on our own. We'd had no family orientation prior to arrival, no housing provided, and no support team of any sort. Wayne's bosses were in Vienna and New York and the local UN office had no interest in helping with domestic issues. We'd been dropped into a foreign land and were told to proceed from there on our own.

There we were, sitting on Park Road in the middle of a Pakistani neighborhood where we knew no one. At this point, we knew one Canadian couple who had managed to locate us in early days and invite us for coffee (wow, did I enjoy that cup of coffee when I only had access to guest house tea), a couple of teachers at the kids' school and the UN representative.

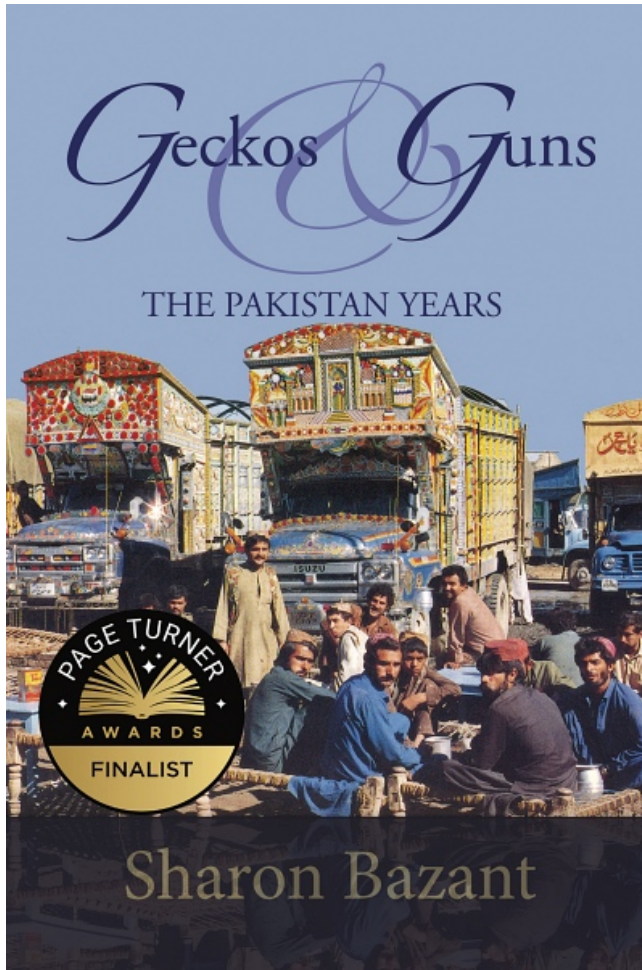
One of Jason's teachers told us that their dhobi was looking for more work and that's how we got Rafique. What a character! He was small, dark-skinned, and wiry with thick cataracts on both eyes. The strength of his vocal cords more than compensated for his diminutive physique. Perpetually smiling and cheerful, his normal conversation involved shouting at the top of his lungs. He affectionately referred to Jason as "boy," and every laundry day, we would hear him booming, "Boy, come and get the rupees I found in your pockets!" Naturally, he came from a long line of dhobis dating back to the British Raj and he had mad laundering skills. The washer and dryer we bought were hooked up at the entrance to our servants' quarters which was on the lower level of the house below the street at the back. Our cook and our driver occupied those two rooms and we rarely, if ever, went to that part of the property. We considered this their personal space. Rafique took charge of the machines, the iron, and the entire laundering territory. He wasn't a big fan of the dryer, so on laundry day, we would find our clothing hanging all over the yard, not only on the clothesline but on every tree and bush available. We had to get used to having our underwear on public display.

We still needed to fill out the staff roster but didn't know how to go about the search. Well, it soon became apparent that local Pakistanis received news through a primeval village messaging system, a sort of drumbeat in the streets. When someone new moved in, the word got out that the newcomers were probably looking for servants. And like magic, as soon as I needed to find domestic help, people started knocking on the door. What a great system! But there was one big drawback—we were completely green.

No one had told me what to look for when hiring staff. I'd never done it before. I hired Hamad as our cook as well as a part-time bearer. I don't remember the bearer's name as he didn't last long. In fact, I went through three or four incompetent cleaners before I found a good one. Nisar, our driver, came with Wayne's work but we offered him lodging in our servants' quarters, so he did personal driving for us as well. We also hired a part-time mali/gardener, a

daytime *chowkidar*/guard, Mir Abas, a nighttime chowkidar, and a Friday night chowkidar—guards for all occasions!

Finally, our staff was complete, some gorgeous furniture pieces had arrived, we had acquired a few oriental carpets, and our house was becoming a home. We looked forward to smooth sailing ahead. Alas, this was not the case. We'd been looking for adventure in an unknown land. Life was about to get a little too adventurous!



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