



How do long drives in Quetta, a family known for its quintessential civility and quiet renown, a deep-rooted faith in Zoroastrianism, and an abiding love for dogs, shape a personality so that it goes on to find significant recognition and acknowledgement at both, the national and the international level?

Aban Marker Kabraji, Asia Region Director of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world's largest and oldest environmental organisation, attributes these markers on her life's journey as the ones that have shaped her and her pioneering work which has been internationally acknowledged. In 1984, she was awarded Order of the Golden Ark, a Dutch award given to luminaries in the field of conservation, like the late Roger Tory Peterson, Jane Goodall, Sylvia Earle and Ravindra Kumar Sinha.

This was followed more recently – even if long overdue – at home, when the Tamgha-e-Imtiaz (Medal of Excellence) was conferred upon Aban in the March 23 honours list, in befitting recogni-



# “Pakistan is hard to work in, but also resilient and receptive to finding solutions”

Aban Marker Kabraji  
Asia Region Director, IUCN

**What was the evolution of the environment movement like?**

The movement developed in the West, but it is interesting to trace the evolution of the environmental movement in Asia, as it draws its origins from the environmental movement in the West, but also runs parallel to the women's movement, and there are some very interesting elements of cross-fertilisation. We find that most of the prominent women of the '60s and '70s and beyond, who were active in

the environmental context, were also active in the women's movement. I don't think that's an accident.

I think both movements stemmed from the same frustrations in the '60s. There were lots of cross-currents between the young of that time in the US, Europe, Asia and parts of Africa.

It was the time of an awakening to rights, not as much human rights as anti-nuclear and anti-war rights. It had its roots in American hegemony — depending on which side you were

on. That, in turn, led to the Stockholm Conference in the early '70s, which you can say was a milestone for the world.

But conservation had still not become the buzzword it is now. And there weren't really many campaigners in the field at that time, were there?

When we came to the '70s and '80s, the environment was largely seen as zoology, botany, natural sciences, and nature studies, and maybe to some extent, taxonomy. Conservation had not really entered the consciousness.

tion of her contribution to her services in the environmental field, the cause she has so long and tirelessly espoused.

Environment as an issue, long-neglected by the powers-that-be, except for the occasional token statements expressing concern, has only recently really been gaining the attention it deserves, in the wake of the successive natural disasters Pakistan has been hit by, among them the devastating floods in 2010. This, despite the fact that the country has long featured among the top 10 in the list of those most threatened by climate change.

However, the disasters, dangerous rankings and perhaps the indifference of the authorities, have only catalysed the tireless efforts of people who have been working in the field of environmental conservation, policy and advocacy for decades. These are the people who have, through their dedication and commitment, put in place institutional and policy reforms that have awoken the country at many lev-

els to finally get a handle on environmental problems that threaten the ecology, indeed the very life of the people.

Aban can unarguably be called the pioneering champion of the environment in Pakistan. The decision to embark on this challenging journey was a conscious choice for her — but a difficult one to make because her heart was equally vested in the struggle for women's rights. She was part of the nascent women's movement in Pakistan way back in the '70s, that had launched a brave struggle for the increasingly diminishing rights of women in the oppressive Zia era. Seeing the feminist sisterhood firm in its resolve to push ahead, she thus focused her attention and energies on the other area that needed urgent attention and had captured her interest and crusading spirit: the environment.

*Newsline* caught up with Aban to learn about her momentous journey.

### **So would 'biodiversity' be called the 'big picture?'**

Around the '70s that consciousness began to permeate into the minds of western nations, particularly in respect of teaching. E.O Wilson described it as the "Web of Life." But we still came up against the very rigid demarcations between forestry, zoology and marine sciences in South Asia that existed at the time; we didn't see the cross-sectoral linkages.

### **How were you able to overcome the strict demarcation that existed in education?**

Well, when I went to the University of Karachi, where I studied microbiology for a year, I was extremely frustrated because there was no cross-sectoral thinking at all. It was very rigid. I personally moved beyond this at the London University where the barriers were beginning to become fuzzier.

### **And are things better now?**

I began to notice those changes when I started seeing the growing understanding in different countries of the teaching staff in the '90s. For example, you get a very good understanding of cross-sectoral linkages in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore — unlike what is visible in the rigid academic backgrounds

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of Pakistan, Nepal, Thailand, Vietnam and China. We need to modernise the whole curriculum. In Pakistan, they are still working in silos. Because that is how they have been taught. While it is getting better, it is still a struggle.

### **How and when did you gravitate towards this field, and decide to make it your life's mission?**

I think it has a lot to do with my early childhood in Quetta where I grew up

in a natural environment — mountains, gardens, orchards — in a family which was maybe not very environmentally aware, but which understood nature, and believed in conservation; water was not to be wasted, pure air was not to be taken for granted, earth was not to be polluted.

Part of it was also because the Zoroastrian philosophy was very much a part of my family's background, where there was this very strong pantheistic streak of respect for nature. So there are prayers to the water, there are prayers to the mountains, to plants, prayers to the sun and the moon. We acknowledge God's greatest creations, which have to be treated with utmost respect. You might also find this ethos in other religions, but perhaps in Zoroastrianism it is even more pronounced; it is in specifics rather than in generalities.

And because it becomes a part of religious ritual, such as our using sandalwood in fire or the ephedria herb as part of the purification of drinks, all this clearly affects our consciousness. Like one of the things you are taught, which stays with you, is that every dog that you have owned, will wait for you on the bridge to heaven.

Being a Girl Guide also increased my

appreciation and interest in nature and animals.

**So was conservation just a natural career choice for you?**

Well, there was always the expectation that I would join the family business of pharmaceuticals, so I studied biology. And I did join it. I worked for my family business for three years. Although I came in as the owners' daughter, it was still fairly daunting to

Conservation of Nature (IUCN) asked the WWF if they could have some of my time for their work.

That led to Mr. Kirmani proposing that the IUCN be asked to draft the National Conservation Strategy, which started taking up so much of my time that the IUCN took me on full time, basically as a project representative on mangroves and on the National Conservation Strategy.

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**“There are countries that are hard to work in due to security issues, corruption, a lack of donor interest, of human and other resources. Pakistan is one such country. In many ways it is a very hard country to work with, but it’s also a country of great opportunities. I have never met a Pakistani who is not receptive or not ready to respond to problems and look for solutions. We are a very, very resilient country. We are a problem-solving people. That is how we’ve survived all these years.”**

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be just 22 years old and enter a factory with 400 men working in it.

This made my father open various departments of the factory to women, and because his daughter had gone in there, the labourers and managers felt it was okay to bring their wives, sisters and daughters to work. This in the mid-'70s in a place like Quetta!

A few years later, I got married and moved to Karachi. I was looking for a job there when someone referred me to the Sindh Wildlife Department where there was this wonderful man, Mr. Kirmani, who told me to write proposals for mangroves and sea turtle conservation. I did that and we got the projects. That is how I started.

I worked for the Sindh government for three or four years and through that project got involved with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and they asked me to set up their office in Karachi. Then the International Union for

In the late '90s, there was a big push to decentralise the IUCN, with offices in regions where until then there were just project offices in countries. So it meant defining a region, recruiting, deciding which programmes members wanted to work on. I moved to the Asia Region.

**Which was the hardest country to work in?**

There are countries that are hard to work in due to security issues, corruption, a lack of donor interest, of human and other resources. Pakistan is one such country. It is one of the hardest at every level. But in a sense, because we grew from here and it is now one of the largest programmes in the world, the people who have worked here are pretty much able to handle any other country.

**You have mentioned an environment in crisis. Is there an awareness of this crisis in Pakistan and are these is-**

**sues gaining traction?**

Pakistan, in many ways is a very hard country to work with, but it's also a country of great opportunities. What has continued to sustain me in the Pakistani context is that there is always receptivity. I have never met a Pakistani who is not receptive or not ready to respond to problems and look for solutions.

Partly I think this has been our history. Because we have had the kind of history that we have, we are a very, very resilient country. We are a problem-solving people. That is how we've survived all these years.

A country of 250 million cannot be ignored. And if you could only address the fundamental issues and problems, like a lack of resources, to bring equity, justice, if a baseline was developed, and the processes were more robust and more honest, Pakistan could be a very major player.

**In the context of the looming threat of climate change, do you think, given that we keep missing targets — we missed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) — that not enough is being done to tackle it?**

We have been in this state for as long as I can remember. Have things gotten better or worse? In certain areas they have gotten worse. We lost two decades to insurgency and war. We have lost a generation. This nation of ours could have been harnessed in a much more productive manner.

But through all that period, policies were being worked on, laws were being framed, projects were being undertaken. People ask if things have improved and I say if we (IUCN) hadn't been there, things would have been a lot worse.

But you cannot look at the environment in isolation. We cannot have a clean environment if we don't have education, access to clean water or clean air; it is all part of the same package.

**What about the new dynamic: Pakistan being sandwiched between these pressing demands and the emergence of China as the new power**

**which is calling the shots, demanding certain things be done by Pakistan. Will it be the New East India Company, as many allege, or will the dividends of development reach down to where they should?**

Let me tell you that my interest in the IUCN at the moment is the 'Belt and Road' issue. The IUCN's president is from China. I am in charge of our office in China, and I have most recently been put in charge of the Oceania region.

I have watched the Chinese presence grow in the last 10 years, and it's almost entirely related to infrastructure, which is part of their 'Belt and Road' Initiative. This is also a very, very fundamental aspect of their policy, 'Eco-Civilisation,' ie. ecological civilisation, which is their umbrella policy. It means doing things 'green.'

Within that they have this massive infrastructure policy. They are working through state companies and the private sector. While some of their laws in China are evolving, the onus is on the country in which the Chinese are investing, to make certain that the laws are followed.

So if people in Pakistan say it is coming in as a colonial power, Pakistan only has itself to blame! Because it is not the Chinese who dictate which laws they follow in Pakistan. It is the Pakistanis. And in order to do that, it is important that bridges are constantly formed, between the environmental issues in Pakistan and China.

What we are trying to do is to build those bridges between the investors and ministries, and Pakistani and Chinese investors. They are very sensitive to negative international views of China, and are usually extremely receptive to addressing them.

We have worked with Chinese companies who are investing in Pakistan as a part of the CPEC. They have gotten the IUCN to do environment assessments, they have taken cognisance of our reports and asked what they should do next.

We are now hoping to work in the

Northern Areas, specifically looking at what impacts biodiversity. And we are looking to work with communities to build a resilience to work with this kind of infrastructure development.

The Government of Balochistan has already said it would be happy for the IUCN to work on such an assessment for Gwadar. The ministries in China have also said they would be happy for us to work on this.



For journalists, even addressing the CPEC issue and expressing their concerns or reservations about it, is almost akin to blasphemy. The minute they raise any questions, they are said to be 'anti-development.'

In my work with the Chinese, once you get past the cultural barrier and understand where they are coming from, you will find, as I have, that they are extremely good people to work with. The Government of Pakistan is happy to see us work with them. But then of course there will be apprehensions, and there may be some Pakistani and Chinese companies who see our dealings as a hindrance. But that is okay.

**The question of resource equity has to be addressed too...**

This is very complex. We have to look at the socio-economic impacts of the CPEC. While I understand China's imperatives in the Belt and Road initiative, I also look at it from the point of view of opportunities, investment, infrastructure development. It is one of

the best things that could happen.

The issue is how best to develop those bridges between the Chinese and the Pakistanis, or the Chinese and the Sri Lankans, the Chinese and the people of the Pacific, that are needed to establish that dialogue.

**Do we have a good set of laws to achieve that?**

Yes, absolutely. If that dialogue process is formalised and institutionalised,

then as an advisory group to this whole set of projects, we would almost be like a safety valve, which would be of benefit to all. Once the model is established in Pakistan, maybe it can be lifted and used in other countries.

**What do you think of the timing of the Pakistani award recently conferred on you, considering you have been working for so many years and have been widely acknowledged internationally for years? And how important are these awards?**

I don't know. I just feel that it is nice to be acknowledged in Pakistan. It may help raise awareness of the subject. You become a vehicle. I have said to everybody I work with that "the award is as much yours as it is mine." The most important thing for me is when people say, "well deserved," because to be honest, you look at the honours list and begin to wonder how many others ought to have been in that list and are not. Maybe it is just a roll of the dice! ■