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Macchu Picchu: marvel of the Incas

by Kaiser Zaman



Author in front of a section of Machu Picchu.

PACHACUTI, prince of the Incas, would have been very surprised if he knew that one day, Alberto Fujimori, a Japanese by descent, would preside over the Inca Empire, part of which is present-day Peru. Pachacuti was the descendant of the sun-god Inti Taita; on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Fujimori's ancestors worshipped the divine descendants of the sun-goddess Amaterasu. Pachacuti would have also been surprised to know that someone from Sylhet would travel to his capital Cuzco, to see what was left of his legendary empire.

Back in 1438 when Pachacuti was creating architectural marvels, the Western civilisation had no idea that farther to the west, across the limitless expanse of the ocean, lay huge continents inhabited by other civilisations. The discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus a mere fifty-two years later would be the beginning of the end of the civilisations of the indigenous people who came to be called Indians as a legacy of Columbus' mistaken notion that sailing west, he would reach India. Columbus never knew that he had stumbled on to a continent where people had been living for at least 20,000 years.

I came from the land Columbus was looking for to the land that he had discovered. I had read that the Inca gold was legendary, the architecture breathtaking and the engineering stupendous. In his heyday, the Inca (as the king was called) ruled over a kingdom stretching 2,500 miles from present-day Ecuador to Argentina and Chile. The Incas called their empire Tawantinsuyo — the four corners of the world. They built many palaces and temples, and 10,000 miles of paved footpaths crisscrossed their domain. One trail, now known as the 'Inca Trail', stretched from their capital, Cuzco, along the Urubamba river, over the Andes mountains, down the valleys and through an amazing variation of climate and vegetation, ranging from steaming rain forests to arid pampas, to their sacred city, Machu Picchu. The Inca people had gouged a path along sheer cliffs, dug tunnels, laid countless thousands of steps hewn from hard rock, and built suspension bridges to cross the rivers and streams.

Yet, for some unexplained reason, they abandoned Machu Picchu. The Spanish conquistadores did not even know of the city's existence although they travelled into the remotest corners of the Inca land in pursuit of the last Inca and his treasures. For nearly half a millennia, this monument of Inca civilisation and the approach path leading to it were covered by vegetation until discovered by an American archaeologist, Bingham Young, in 1911. I wanted to walk the trail and wander through the sacred city of the past to experience the mystery.

My wife and I flew into Cuzco from Lima and were met by Marcello who was going to be our guide for the four day trek. Since we would be walking at altitudes of nearly four-thousand feet, we arrived in Cuzco a few days in advance to acclimatise ourselves with high altitude breathing. At eleven thousand three hundred feet above sea level, Cuzco is blessed with crisp air, clear blue skies and mild climate. Today, it is no longer the

capital of a powerful empire but a medium-sized town inhabited by the descendants of the ruthless Spanish conquistadores and the phlegmatic Indians. However, the architecture, language, religious beliefs and other cultural traits of the vanquished Indians are evident everywhere. All of which makes Cuzco a charming town with a faint otherworldly ambience. The Indian women sell handicrafts and everyday items by the side of buildings reflecting Spanish architecture literally built on Inca foundations. I liked Cuzco.

Our trek turned out to be a bit of an expedition. We were six of us — my wife and myself, a Vietnamese American from South Carolina, an airline stewardess from New York, and an elderly couple from Australia — and six Indian porters, which made it a party of thirteen including our guide. The porters were all men — well, one of them appeared to be no more than a boy of eleven and I felt rather badly that he should be carrying a heavy load on his back for us. I needn't have, for it turned out that he was far more fit than I was for the rigorous four days that lay ahead of us. Similarly, I had worried that the Australian couple — the man was seventy-one years old and his wife sixty-eight — would slow us down. Again, little did I know how much energy people can possess when they have zest for life.

The arrangements were rather elaborate. We were going to hike from early morning until late afternoon when we would pitch camp and repeat this routine until we reached Machu Picchu. The porters would get to a camping site ahead of us, set up the tents and have evening tea ready by the time we caught up with them. We would then spend a couple of hours relaxing while the porters prepared dinner. Of course, wine would be served with dinner, which would be followed by dessert and coffee. In the morning, we would be served breakfast and would start our hike while the porters stayed behind to break camp, re-pack everything and overtake us to set up the next camp. We were relieved to know that all we would have to carry would be ourselves, our picnic lunch and our camera. The porters would carry an impressive quantity of gear: separate sleeping tents, a dining tent with tables and chairs, a toilet tent, sleeping bags, ground sheets, extra blankets, mosquito nets, all kinds of food, our personal clothing, video and still cameras, and a number of other items. When all the gear was sorted out and apportioned among the six men, it seemed that they would buckle under the load and could never cope with the pace that would be required. Once again, I was quickly disabused of my skepticism. The stamina and agility of these mountain men left me gasping for air.

We left the pretty little hamlet of Ollantaytambo, which still has the vestiges of Inca culture, and within a short time were climbing up a narrow ledge on the side of the mountain. It was a gentle climb and we were still limbering up. After a couple of hours of climbing up the rocky incline, I looked back and I was impressed. Far below lay Ollantaytambo. The six porters, who had seemed to be in no hurry to get going, looked like a thin column of ants as they moved along the narrow trail fashioned out of the mountain

by their ancestors. I could see the silvery Causichara river almost directly below us but it seemed strangely silent. An hour later, we had gone down almost level with the river and could hear its roar as it coursed its way through the mountains.

The muffled sound of people moving around and whispering woke me up. With superhuman effort, I opened my eyes to see that it was already dawn and the porters were starting a camp fire. It was cosy in the sleeping bag inside the tent but the camp fire looked tempting. I wrapped myself in a blanket and went out. The beauty of the vista, the silhouette of the mountains, the outline of the ruins, the mist, and the ever so slight lightening of the sky made me feel as if I had been transported into an ethereal non-existence.

The day's walk, however, brought me back to the reality of nature. The gentle climb gave way to fairly steep and rocky terrain. My knees gave notice that I shouldn't take them for granted, my feet complained that my boots seemed to be shrinking, and my back began to resent the rucksack which it had tolerated only the day before. But my mind and my eyes were feasting. The vegetation changed constantly. The sparse hills gave way to tall trees and would again become sparse as we reached a higher elevation.

The windward side of a mountain would have bright colours — light green cactus with red and purple flowers, yellow and green birds, and tall pine trees. On the leeward side of the same mountain, it would be very different — a dark rain forest, hot, humid and steaming, hardwood trees with dark green leaves, moss and lichen everywhere. The contrast was fascinating. By early afternoon, I was exhausted but we were still in the rainforest. The porters had long overtaken me and at every bend of the mountain I expected to see the camp, all set up to welcome the tired traveller. Instead, it was one crest after another. Obviously, the camp was going to be set up beyond the jagged

mountain range. I was about to collapse when we finally got out of the forested area and saw the camp. It seemed that it had been there for a long time. I had a cup of tea made from coca leaf. It was very refreshing and gave me a sense of well-being. I could see why cocaine would be so addictive.

Day three was sheer torture from the moment I opened my eyes. I could barely move, the entire body was a mass of aches and pains. Parts of the body which I had always taken for granted, now made their existence known — with a vengeance. Our camp was by the side of a swift stream where we went to wash. The water was ice cold, which actually helped to remove any trace of lethargy induced by the high altitude. Marcello gave us a preview of the terrain we were going to cover. He pointed at the distant mountain and said that we would cross over to the other side at Warmiwanuqa (Dead Woman) Pass which was 14,000 feet.

The climb started almost immediately. As the morning wore on, I could feel the exhaustion in every bone. Breathing in the rarefied atmosphere was increasingly difficult and I had to stop every hundred feet to catch my breath. The fact that the Inca porters were overtaking me closer and closer to the starting point was a sure sign that I was not holding up very well but it didn't upset me since I knew that the mountain people have larger lungs. The porters rarely slackened their pace.

They would go down long flights of the rough-hewn steps with their feet barely touching the ground, while my knees turned to jelly. When the elderly Australian

couple began to leave me behind, it did little to boost my ego. However, it was some consolation to look back and see the other three members of our party trailing me.

Fortunately, none of us suffered from enervating altitude sickness for which the only cure is to go down to a lower altitude. Finally, we reached the highest point of our expedition at 13,945 feet and stopped for a rest, and the obligatory picture-taking. Exhausted, a little rested and very satisfied, we continued on.

The final day's trek was not all downhill, though a little less punishing. Knowing that we would be reaching our destination before sunset gave an additional psychological boost to our tired muscles. We walked over mountain ridges which gave us a commanding view for miles. While not matching the grandeur of the Himalayas, the Andes convey a greater sense of desolation. There were very few living human settlements. More often, we encountered the ruins of the past, some of which are extremely well preserved, like the baths at Winay Wayna. Only rarely did we see people, usually a mother leading her child riding a llama or a horse.

The famous alpaca and vicuña which produce a wool softer than cloud are all but gone. The majestic puma, the soaring condor, and the sure-footed deer are virtually extinct.

By late afternoon, we reached Intipunku Gate from where we caught our first glimpse of the majestic Machu Picchu — the lost city of the Incas. I looked down at the

spectacular view of a vast complex of terraces, buildings and temples constructed out of solid granite with primitive tools and such unfathomable dexterity that it has baffled archaeologists and engineers. I sat quietly for a while on a promontory, trying to visualise the thousands of men painstakingly creating one of the greatest wonders of the world. I was overcome by a sense of melancholy.

If the first glance of a monument takes your breath away and you are filled with emotions, you can rightly feel that you are looking at one of the wonders of the world. Machu Picchu is undoubtedly one of them.

Like Angkor Wat, Borobudur, and the Temples of Abu Sibel, the monument created at Machu Picchu by the Incas reflects man's desire to pay homage to his gods by creating something which reaches the utmost limit of his ability. It is a marvel of architecture and engineering, of the basic laws of nature and the basic nature of man.

It is also shrouded in mystery as to why it was built and why it was abandoned. But there is no doubt that it is a wonder of human achievement.

It sits atop a saddle, surrounded by the mountains of the Andes range, at a height of 9,000 feet above sea level.

Down below runs the raging Urubamba river. It is the most awesome of all the Inca and other pre-Columbian monuments found in South America. It was created by levelling the mountain top and building the entire city by interlocking blocks of granite rock painstakingly cut, measured, cut, measured again, and again, until the pieces fit so tightly that even the thinnest of knives and the meanest of creepers have not been able to penetrate the walls in four hundred years. Only the roofs which were made of straw have vanished. The slopes of the mountain are beautifully terraced and contoured. The terraces are buttressed with retaining walls and were created for agriculture and stability.

There are numerous stair cases, some have only a few steps while others have hundreds.

The streets are paved with stones and the houses and buildings are properly aligned. There are different sectors for agriculture, industry, residential areas, a main square, prison area, religious buildings and a sacred plaza, and finally, the royal quarter.

There is a defensive perimeter of massive walls, dry moats and observation points.

The inner city is believed to have been the sacred area and contains a number of religious buildings, temples, and shrines.

One block of dwellings is believed to have been the home of the Chosen Women



Author in front of a section of Machu Picchu.

who, like the Vestal Virgins, had a special religious role. One structure of particular beauty was either a royal mausoleum or ornament chamber.

It is made of white granite blocks arranged and fitted into each other with amazing precision. The base stone has thirty-two corners, in three dimensions, each fitting tightly into another stone. Such extraordinary fitting of stones into each other was a special skill of the Inca artisans. The walls and doorways were built slightly narrower at the top in order to withstand earthquakes.

For an agricultural people in a mountainous area, the knowledge of seasons was particularly important.

The Incas were an artistic people. Perhaps they took away their artifacts when they abandoned Machu Picchu and whatever was left behind was either devoured by the jungle or carted off by archaeologists and treasure hunters. Walking among the ruins today, one can't help but notice how the site had been picked clean.

The Inca empire was also picked clean of its legendary wealth, by the Spanish Conquistadores. All the gold and silver jewellery, religious artifacts and virtually all the other valuables of the royalty, the temples and the people were extorted from the Incas. Priceless works of art in gold and silver were melted into ingots and taken away to Spain or appropriated by the Spanish soldiers. The fine textiles were gone. The spirit and the names of being creative were gradually choked out of the people.

The Inca civilisation, which had an advanced social order

and immense wealth, yet proved utterly vulnerable to domination and eventual total annihilation by a small band of adventurers who came from thousands of miles away, remains an enigma. For all their accomplishments, the Incas had never paid much attention to acquiring the skills to defend their wealth against predators. Perhaps the reason why they did not master the art of warfare is that they were an essentially disciplined and docile people. They could never imagine the kind of cruelty and rapacity they were going to experience from the Spanish whom they mistakenly thought to be the reincarnation of their god Viracocha.

Apart from this philosophical disadvantage, the Incas did not have a written language, did not know the wheel, had never seen a horse and their weapons were primitive. These weaknesses of the Incas, coupled with the greed and ruthlessness of the conquistadores, could lead to but only one fate.

The Incas lost their beloved capital, Cuzco, and were driven deeper and deeper into the inhospitable mountains. The last of the Inca kings, Tupac Amaru, was hunted down in his last bastion, Expiritu Pampa, deep in the Amazon rain forest and brought to Cuzco in chains. As he was led in, sitting on a mule, his sister, watching the sad spectacle cried out, "Whither are you going, my brother, prince and sole king of the four corners?"

The god of the Inca people, the Inca himself, descendant of the sun, was decapitated by a single blow of sword in front of thousands of his grieving subjects.

Persons With Disabilities Have Hidden Abilities

Judy Fairclough

I am often asked why I campaign for the rights of disabled people. Part of my answer is the result of my enriching experience of living with a brother and a son who are both mentally disabled from birth, but the main answer is that disabled people, even in some developed countries, are among the most disadvantaged and some of us must help blow away the myths, misunderstandings, and prejudices which surround all discussion and lack of knowledge of disabilities. Disabled people are people just like you and me, but they just are not able to do some of the things you and I do every day. However, there are many things that they do which you and I cannot do. Some of my very closest friends have disabilities but I do not notice their disabilities; I only notice

their often towering personalities. There is a beautiful poem which explains the situation of disabled people which appears below. This poem was written by an English woman Judy Fairclough who as a result of disseminated sclerosis (which was what multiple sclerosis was then called), died in 1987. She was a professional actress for several years and also a teacher of drama. As the disease gradually got worse, she had to give up teaching and needed the help of a wheelchair. However, she then began wonderful and successful work teaching drama to visually impaired people and was involved in the setting up of a blind drama group. She wrote the poem below as a script of a play about the acceptance of disability in society. On stage she performed the central and

only speaking role. Everything else was movement by the blind actors and actresses.

AM NOT YET DEAD

I am not yet dead : oh hear me
Let not those who have sight and yet are blind come near me
I am without sight but yet can feel the blind
Insensitivity of those with seeing eyes
I am not an object to be moved and grasped with never a 'Can I help?' or left abandoned without a word with only silence to unfold the truth
Eyes may not see but ears can hear, and finger tips relay the wonders of the world
I see with a mind's eye-do you?

I am not yet dead : oh help me
Let not those who see only my chair or my sticks reject me
For they are crutches for an ailing body
Not a sick mind or failing spirit
Steel frames may imprison my flesh
Severing me from human touch
Buy my mind flies free as does my heart
Preserve me from those who shun me
Seeing only a thing in a chair or on sticks
I am not yet dead : oh hear me
I cannot hear you, often cannot speak
But cocooned in a cotton-wool world of silence
Yet I breathe, I see, I move,

I exist, I'm me
There is a silence where once there was sound
There is a silence where no sound has ever been
But the world, enters my mind and heart in many ways
And all that makes up the sum total of me
Seeks to escape — have patience while I try
Let not those who are selfish with time come near me
I am not yet dead — protect me
From those who through embarrassment and fear
Will not come near me — but shun and avoid me
Or would have me caught helpless in an institutional net
Or would hammer out my identity and live my life
Thinking my thoughts speaking my words

Replacing me for safety's sake.
We are not today the forgotten people
We are objects of governmental concern
The taxpayer's burden — but we are more
Oh, so much more —
We are not just The Blind
The Deaf
The Physically Disabled
The Mentally Handicapped
We are above all just men and women
We ask no more than to be accepted as such.
(Written by Judy Fairclough, Published in English in Art Ability, a book edited by Simon Goodenough and published in 1989 by Michael Russell. (Publishing) Ltd in association with the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust.)