

*Sankar Chatterjee*

**Humanity Shines in the Mountains of Peru**

**I** along with my wife was visiting Ollantaytambo, a continuously living Inca habitat adorned with historic remnants of this past advanced civilization. Ollantaytambo is nestled in the Sacred Valley, several miles north-west of the city of Cusco, the past capital of the civilization in Peru. Just outside the town, within a reasonable hiking distance, stands the mountainous site Pumamarca displaying additional remnants from the period. Due to time-constrain, one afternoon, we hired a local cab to drive us up there on a winding semi-paved road with a plan of visiting the place and then hiking down several kilometers on a walking trail. Suddenly, our driver came to a screeching stop. Without any orange cautionary sign anywhere along the path that could have warned us about a road work, a sizable chunk of the road was dug open and left as such. Due to the narrowness of the road with the slope of the mountain one side while the valley at the bottom, the driver had no opportunity to drive around that opening. However, he mentioned to us that the destination was not that far from there and pointed us towards a distant walking trail through the bushes, used by the locals to access the mountain top. He assured us that, once there, we will find the downhill trail to go back to the town. We decided to follow his instructions to reach the mountain top, while looking backwards as long as we could, how skillfully the driver (who did not utter a single word of swearing in this sudden development of a bad situation) was slowly backing his cab downwards on that winding road. And I found telling myself "Remember this occasion when everyday urban life becomes stressful even from a minor event!"

Once arriving at the site, we had a gorgeous panoramic view of the surrounding mountains and valleys. We also found the historic ruins, postulated to be a part of the defense system of the past society. While there, we looked around but could not find any single soul that day. Then, it dawned on us that there was no marker for a downhill trail along with any visible sign of the trail itself. Baffled, we started to look around when we noticed some human activity of a small community nestled into a valley in the middle of the slope of one side of the mountain. We spotted two brightly dressed individuals at the perimeter of the property. We started waving our hands hoping they will see us. Fortunately, they did and waved back. Then we saw them to start climbing towards us. As they appeared closer to us, we realized that they were not adults but two little girls, and not even teenagers. They spoke mainly in the old Inca language mixed with a few words of Spanish but were smart enough to realize that we needed help to find the downhill trail. With their hand gestures, child-like giggling and combination of languages, they were able to explain to us that the actual trail starts a couple of kilometers downhill from where we were standing and we needed to access it by walking on the meadow in front, covered with tall dry grass. To our surprise, they offered their help to lead us up to the trailhead on the path that seemed nonexistent to us, but they were aware of. However, it was completely in the opposite direction to their village. Language barrier prevented us to carry on long conversation, but we covered a few kilometers distance of the grassy knoll to arrive at the trailhead. From there the town of Ollantaytambo down

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below in the valley became visible. They said their good-byes, turned around and started their return journey towards their village, now a few kilometers away, neither expecting nor accepting any remuneration in return. We began our journey downhill towards the valley, feeling an awe of this display of kindness of two little girls from a remote mountain village of a poor country. What a lesson in both humanity and humility it was to bring back home from this trip, along with the memory of the behavior of a Zen-like cab driver and two little sweet children!