It’s claimed to be the worst flood Pakistan has seen in over 80 years. 20 million people were affected, thousands killed. Nearly one-fifth of the country was damaged leaving helpless citizens homeless, fatally wounded, and hungry. Corruption, favoritism and poverty led to unsanitary and inadequate medical facilities.

Today, nearly a year later, the impact of this devastating natural disaster lingers on. Communities of people are still left homeless and face malnutrition, areas are still covered in motionless, contaminated floodwaters.

Enter two women, visionaries rather, who believe in the power of a helping hand. Sweta Chawla and Dr. Geet Chainani are two Sindhi Hindus, raised and reared in the United States, who believed that if they didn’t return to
their roots, to Sindh, in a time of need, who would? These remarkable women made a choice, one which many would consider a risk, and traveled to Pakistan in the most unfavorable of conditions demonstrating that one leap of faith can, in fact, make a difference.

Sweta Chawla

Sweta Chawla is a person who defies the common adage, ‘one person can’t do it all.’ Not only is she a professor of pharmacy at Arnold and Marie Schwartz College of Pharmacy at Long Island University, but she also manages a community clinic in Brooklyn, NY, is a certified diabetes educator, runs a clinical site with pharmacy students on rotations, leads Disease State Management programs educating the public on various diseases and the risks that come along with them, and is happily married.

Although she moved from Bombay to the United States at the ripe, young age of two, Sweta has managed to keep a tight grasp on her Sindhi heritage and culture. Therefore, upon hearing of the destructive floods in 2010, there was no doubt in her mind that she needed to travel to Sindh and help her land, and her people. “I always had a desire to go to Sindh one day – the idea of going to help in a time of crisis just seemed really natural for me.”

A Time to Shine

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself.” When Sweta first decided to travel to Pakistan and aid in flood relief, fear, among nervousness, overtook her. She was told that she would be reprimanded and perhaps killed for not only being Hindu, but also being an American. The world was hearing about bomb blasts in Pakistan day after day, night after night. Thousands of thoughts, feelings of “what if,” and questions raced through everyone’s minds, including Sweta’s.

Whether it was her naiveté or her inner strength combined with her Sindhi pride, Sweta took that leap of faith and contacted ShineHumanity, one of the few NGO’s dedicated to disaster relief in Pakistan. After that, the pieces just fell into place; her visa was approved immediately, and the

Sweta Chawla visiting the Sadh Bella Mandir in Sukkur, Sindh

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~ SWETA CHAWLA
hospital she was assigned to just happened to be in her family’s hometown of Shikarpur. This, according to Sweta, was the sign she needed. A sign from the universe telling her to face her fear and apprehension and to do what was right.

Upon arrival in Pakistan, all of Sweta’s concerns and anxieties were immediately put to rest, “There was no hiding that I am Hindu and that I am American – it was so unexpectedly opposite of everything I feared.” Not only was Sweta warmly greeted in Pakistan, but she soon learned how closely all inhabitants of Shikarpur lived; whether they were Hindu or Muslim, Indian or Pakistani. They were less of a community, more of a family.

During her time at Shikarpur Civil Hospital, Sweta worked primarily with women and children directly affected by the flood. These children had simple sicknesses, which were easily treatable, but had taken over their bodies and lives due to lack of access to any sort of healthcare, medication, or even nutrition. Sweta’s medical knowledge and heartfelt generosity towards her people gave them a chance for survival and recovery from the destructiveness of the flood.

However, Sweta’s altruism didn’t end there. After returning to New York, she continues working with ShineHumanity developing teaching programs for future volunteers. Additionally, she has recently begun working with Real Medicine Foundation, starting an initiative to support a Mobile Health Unit – run by fellow Sindhi and dear friend, Geet Chainani.

Dr. Geet Chainani
Compassion and humanitarianism are synonymous with the name Geet Chainani. If ever there was a woman who followed her heart and went on to make a difference in the world, it is she. After growing up in New York and almost completing her education in International Business, Geet realized her passion remained in her abandoned childhood dream of building a career in the medical field.

Upon earning her doctorate in medicine, Geet left her friends, family, and life she had known for so many years to venture out to Pakistan and learn about her Sindhi heritage. More importantly however, she traveled to Pakistan to help her people when they needed her the most. “As a Sindhi, I’m happy I’m here in the land my great grandfather once fought to preserve.” Geet’s desire to connect with her great-grandfather brought her back to Sindh; she followed in her ancestors’ footsteps and began fighting for the land and people to which she belongs.

Let There Be Light
While in an emergency relief center in Shikarpur, Geet saw the dire need for healthcare. Mothers were pleading for someone to help their children survive; Children were seen suffering minor ailments which, if left untreated, would take their lives. Infants, barely able to hold their heads up, dehydrated and weak. Geet then knew that this is where she belonged; she had found her calling. “Being in the region now makes me feel grateful for being given the chance to serve humanity when it’s needed the most and where so many are still being ignored or have been forgotten.” Her humanity and dedication to these thousands of victims shed a ray of hope on their lives; she brought a sense of brotherhood and camaraderie, which they were missing, to overcome this disastrous period.

After spending a week in Shikarpur,
Geet realized her work had just begun. By forming a partnership between two non-profit organizations, Life Bridge US and Real Medicine Foundation, Geet started to combat the increasing need for healthcare in two of the flood-stricken regions of Sindh by creating a Mobile Health Unit. In many regions, access to healthcare had become close to impossible due to lack of funds, as well as damaged roads; Geet’s dream was to bridge this gap by bringing medical facilities straight to the villages.

“I chose to become a doctor because I wanted to save lives, but more importantly, I have always wanted my work to mean something.” By battling the negative outcomes of the traumatic Pakistani floods and bringing healthcare directly to those who need it most, Geet has, in fact, made her work mean something. Not only has she given back to the community, the people, and the land to which she belongs, but she has done so in a remarkable and benevolent way. She truly has been the light at the end of their dark, winding tunnel.

Selfless Service
It is not very often you will meet individuals who selflessly dedicate themselves to thousands of people, most of whom they don’t know and may never meet again. Then again, it is not very often you will meet people like Sweta Chawla and Geet Chainani. Both of these incredible women have such a strong belief in their roots and their culture that regardless of only having ancestry ties to Sindh, they generously dedicated such a large part of their lives to helping victims in a time of dire need.

While interviewing both women, what touched me even more than their altruism, was their humility. While speaking about their experiences, whether they were in Pakistan or other parts of the world, both Sweta and Geet emphasized how grateful they are to the people, the places, and the opportunities. Time and time again, they kept reiterating the fact that aiding victims in Pakistan was, more than anything else, a learning experience of their own. Whether it was learning about a world outside of their own, the many organizations dedicated to disaster relief, or about the generosity, kindness and resilience of others, they were all experiences that have changed their lives.

When asked to give a piece of advice to others pursuing medicine and wanting to engage in global healthcare, both women had one common thing to say - just do it! Put the fear and apprehension behind. Not only will these experiences change the lives of the less fortunate, but will teach you priceless lessons as well. So whether it’s volunteering at a civil hospital, or establishing a health unit, every step is a step in the right direction. In the words of Geet, “There’s a point when talking no longer helps and a time for action arrives... We can change everything with just one step.”