

The Musings of a Single Father in Dhaka

BY R*.

I was traveling to Dhaka from Chittagong with my five-year-old son. The flight departed on schedule. But 15 minutes in, the captain announced that he was rerouting us back to Chittagong, because the weather was turbulent and unsafe for landing in Dhaka. We found ourselves stuck in Chittagong airport with hundreds of other stranded passengers. There were a lot of families, many with kids. Soon some of them got cranky, some were jumping and running about, and some were just being irritable with their parents. My son was comparatively composed, sitting next to me; sometimes playing on the phone, sometimes engaging in a little chitchat with me.

Two elderly women sitting behind us were talking about their families and relatives. But as it happened, soon my son and I caught their fancy, and we could both hear them saying "Bah! Such a well-behaved boy, even without his mother here! Ki lokkhhi, Ma chhara shanto hoye boshey achey." They were not being subtle about their emphasis on - 'Ma Chhara!'

There was an eerie moment of silence between me and my son. I wondered what he thought of then, but haven't had the heart to ask him about it. Instead, I looked around, at the families around us. Most of them were couples with toddlers and babies: mothers fed, fathers played. It suddenly hit me, that we didn't belong in that group. We were different, just the two of us - a father and a son. That's not how traveling families "looked" like. But I didn't conform to that norm: It was not a choice; I just couldn't. I am a single father.

My son doesn't know the difference in the roles of a mother and a father. He once asked me why as a father I was not

invited to school when they celebrated mother's day. What was natural to my son, and me was unusual in the eyes of many. Even the three-year-old daughter of a friend noted the difference and asked my son why he was never accompanied by his mother. For the first time, I realized that it was not only me; my son was also facing the same challenges of fitting in to the social norms. I, for myself, have just been able to accept being an outlier. Embracing it, I have realized, it is a long-term process.

The first time I traveled alone with my son was when he was three and a half years old. We were traveling to Nepal for my office's annual retreat and it just seemed like a fun thing we could do together.

'Where is his mother?' The immigration officer asked sharply. 'She is not traveling with us', I responded calmly.

'Why not?' The officer quizzed me, browsing through the pages of the passport. 'Do you have her permission?'

The question caught me off-guard, and I had to gain my composure back to reply, 'why would I need her permission when it's clearly written in the passport that he is my son?'

'Well, we can't let you pass without her permission!' The officer gave his verdict and called his supervisor.

Soon we were sitting at the supervisor's office, being interrogated. The mother has to come or I have to go back home. That's what their stance was.

I desperately called my son's mother who had dropped us at the airport and was half way back home. It took her about 20 minutes to come back and make her way to the immigration counter. By now, my son was already getting frustrated and started to cry. 'See, I told you he would cry'. The shift supervisor was crudely happy. All I could see were

faces of police officers looking at us, judging us. The ordeal didn't end there.

The officer kept on interrogating my then-wife, why would she allow me to travel alone with my toddler? What if he misbehaves and I hit him? I will surely not be able to feed him or put him to sleep. Somehow, even if I was a father, I wasn't a complete parent. At that point, I wondered if it made such a difference - was parenthood all that different for mothers and fathers?



That trip to Nepal became an eye-opener. That first night in Kathmandu was tough: my son caught a cold and had severe earache. I found out that I actually didn't know how to cook his food the way he wanted it. I had to skype his mother to get instructions and figure it out. I spent the night holding my son's ears with the palm of my hands to keep them warm.

The next few days were truly a learn-

ing experience for me: we were both in new territories. I realised I had never before spent this much time alone with him at a stretch. We had to figure out how to communicate effectively with each other. I learnt little nuances about his personality that I didn't know before: how he liked to get dressed, or what would be the best way to feed him. It was an incredible experience as a father. As it happened, we missed our flight from Kathmandu to Dhaka. I had an important business trip to New Delhi and couldn't afford to stay stranded in Kathmandu for another two days. Both my son and I had our Indian visas and after a little consultation with his mother, we decided to travel to Delhi on the next flight. His mother was to join us in Delhi in 2 days. Instead of boarding a flight to Dhaka, we were onboard a flight to Delhi. Imagine the sight of us two with loads of suitcases, the stroller, that small guitar, my son's carry on. He knew that I couldn't do it all alone. He saw the helplessness in me. And my three and half year old knew that he could lend a hand. He was holding his small guitar that he bought as his souvenir and was also pulling his carry on while I struggled to manage all the other suitcases, the boarding passes, and the immigration process.

I would go on to take many more of these trips within and outside the country, just me and my son. We would face inquisitive eyes everywhere, overhear comments and even be asked the occasional, "His mother didn't come?" On the flipside of it, we would also receive unsolicited love and care. Like the time, when the Bangladeshi head chef of a luxury resort in Sylhet offered my son an exclusive trip of his kitchen and taught him to bake, and choose his own lunch and dinner items. The next morning, the

crew in the restaurant went extra miles to offer us food that was not in the menu. The more we traveled, the better we became in trusting each other, in taking care of each other.

As I evolved as a father, I saw more and more of my parent friends, both male and female, who chose to create new family structures, just like mine. One decided to take his young daughter out on a similar trip like me. I know someone who is raising his 6 year old daughter while his wife pursues a PhD in Europe. I know young entrepreneurs who have decided to stay at home all day with their toddlers, while the mothers have a nine to five job. But it hasn't been easy. I had to gain trust from my son's school teachers that they could talk to me about my son's progress at school. I would often be the father in the mother's circle. One of my friends started a mother's forum on Facebook and she made me a member of the group because she thought I was equally hand's on. I now realise that it doesn't matter what the label is - a father or a mother. I am foremost a parent. What matters are the needs of my child. And oddly enough, I probably wouldn't have had the chance to evolve and take this on if I was not to become - a single father.

So, no matter what kind of a parent you are, what your relationship status is, whether you are more "a mother" or "a father," maybe you should consider taking a trip alone with your child. It changed my life and I can promise you that it will be an adventure for you too.

* The writer preferred to use a pseudonym for this article.

Note: This piece was originally written for a play titled "Men don't Talk" produced by Bonhishikha, an organisation that promotes gender equality.

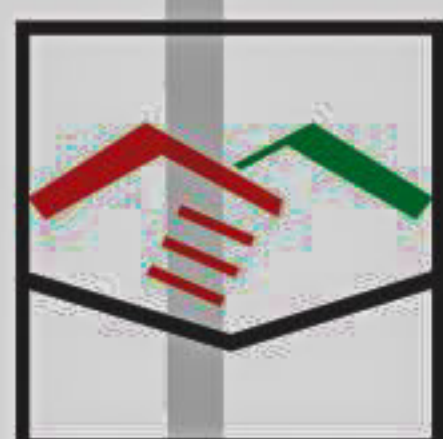
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