

Flight to Freedom

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In the evening we went out of the room and got acquainted with the other occupants, there were families like ours in every room.

Once again we were among complete strangers but there was an invisible bond between us, which grew stronger in the two weeks that we spent there. It was a strange life, for once there was no work, no school—it was like a vacation and it was like one big family. The elders would sit and talk most of the time, while the young boys and girls would get together and go for walks, we played games — '20 questions' where one would think about a personality and the others guessed who it possibly could be.

As most of the time was spent talking we got to know each other pretty well. At times we would wonder as to when will we would be able to start a normal life again. We were also getting tired of the same three meals every day.

Kabul was a much more modern city than Peshawar, where we had come from. The first thing that caught our eye was the freedom of women — who wore skirts, had short hair, and were driving cars.

All this was so new for us. The young people wore western clothes, there were lots of cars on the roads and there were some big shops. The first time that I had ever been to a department store was in Kabul, where every floor had different kinds of products. The people were very courteous and friendly.

We didn't know 'Dari,' the Afghani version of Persian, so we used a lot of sign language. Hindi was quite well understood by the young group thanks to Hindi movies. We watched a couple of movies together among which the most memorable, Bobby, was a super-hit at that time.

One of our friends in Peshawar had given us the phone numbers of their family members in Kabul so we decided to visit them after making appointments. We were so impressed with these people. They truly exhibited the long gone tradition of believ-

ing that 'guests are sent from heaven.'

The whole family was there to welcome us in the sitting room. Everyone sat as long as we were there (we found it rather strange as there was very little conversation — they did not speak English or Urdu, and we could not speak Dari! It was mostly gestures with a little mixture of English, Pashto, and Urdu.

From the eldest member in the family to the young teenage school children — all were there. They were all very western in their ways of clothing, food, and table manners. The thing that I will never forget is that not only did they get the taxi for our return to the hotel but also paid the taxi driver, that's how well mannered these Afghan people were!

Today, whenever I see clips of war-torn Kabul, and suffering of the people my mind goes back to April 1973, when I was there, and my heart breaks to see the fate of this great city, which once was a beautiful metropolis.

It was in same place where people fear to tread now, but more than thirty years ago we had found freedom, security and peace, leaving behind not only all our worldly belongings but also our identity as Pakistanis, in search of a new one passionate one, Bangladeshi.

This is where we had found sanctuary, therefore Kabul will always be special to me. This is true for thousands of Bengalis who went through Afghanistan between 1972 and 1974.

Days passed by, soon ten days had gone and we learnt that we would be leaving in a day or two for New Delhi. We had made good friends with whom I still have remained in contact. In spite of the fact that we were cooped up in one room with so many people sharing one washroom, where we could take a bath only once a week — just the fact that we were safe and free was enough.

Even the hotel people became friendly and there were tearful goodbyes. Finally, we were off to the airport and on board Ariana Airlines, to Delhi.

The flight was chartered and we were all going home.

At the airport there were placards carried by the people of the Bangladesh High Commission. They put us all in buses and took us to another hotel. There were tears in everyone's eyes as we thanked them for everything and also the Indian Government for keeping us in Kabul and taking care of us.

We were served, 'daal bhaat' and never have I seen people appreciating this simple meal the way we all did that night. We stayed for two days and then again we were put on a train to Kolkata.

We were aboard a three tier train, and it was arranged that there would be one family with small babies and one with grown-ups, so we had to share with this young couple. Throughout the next 40 long hours, the babies were crying, the train was slow and stopped at every station.

By now I think all of us were also quite stressed and everyone was edgy. We climbed to the top to sleep during the night and travelled across the countryside and were relieved to reach Howrah Railway Junction— Kolkata's famous station.

My father was quite at home as this is where he studied in the '40s at the Calcutta University. We went to the hotel, and two days later, we were scheduled to reach Dum Dum airport, to board for our final destination— Dhaka. Between Peshawar and Dhaka, 26 days had passed.

EPILOGUE

It has been over 40 years since I decided to write about our Great Escape, it is perhaps impossible for someone who did not experience the horrors that stranded Bengalis endured, that my father, a professor at a university, felt safer to be smuggled to another country rather than staying in Pakistan with his wife and four daughters. The long hazardous journey was across unknown frontiers and great risks were involved, but thank God, at the end we all feel it was one worth taking.

I finished writing this account a few years

ago and now thanks to Prima, my daughter, I am submitting the complete version to share with others. Maybe some reader will come out and tell his or her story of their unforgettable journey to freedom.

Our experience as stranded Bengalis, and the events that followed till we reached Dhaka taught us some valuable lessons in life.

The material things—which we are now so dependent on—are unnecessary. The most important thing in life is life itself; it is to be shared with people you love, your family and friends. And to have faith in The Almighty.

Although almost five decades have passed, I finally penned my words primarily because I always wanted to tell the world about the inhabitants of the Frontier Province of Pakistan, Pathans as we know them. Irrespective of what the world might say, I respect and am eternally grateful to them for helping us— signs of true brotherhood in humanity and religion. We desperately needed their help, and without them escaping from Pakistan would not have been possible.

Secondly, I wanted to write about the Afghans, another great race. I wanted to acknowledge how kind and hospitable they were to the Bangladeshis. Without their support, thousands of people like us could not have reached our motherland.

Today, when I see the suffering of these people it breaks my heart. I have been fortunate to have seen them in their glory days. I firmly believe that they have had more than their share of misfortune, and I eagerly await the day when all their perils are over.

I must also express my heartfelt gratitude to the people of India and the Indian Government, as without their help it would have been impossible.

And lastly, I wanted my children and especially my two grandchildren — Ilana and Ishad, to know about my perilous journey from me, and also be able to read about it...when I am gone.

By Shabnam Chowdhury

মাদার নতুন নাম

কালার গার্ড

মাল্টি বুস্টার

Fast wash
Brilliant White
DETERGENT POWDER

সবচেয়ে ফাস্ট, সবচেয়ে কার্যকরী ..

KOHINOOR
CHEMICAL