

MEMOIRS – CHAPTER 2 – THE SUBCONTINENT



By Abdulrazak Fazal *Updated: August 2020*

The sudden transition from Zanzibar's old stone town into the glamorous Churchgate/Marine Drive of Bombay was a vast contrast for me. It was where the affluent society existed. The affluent also occupied Bombay's posh Malkeshvar/Malbar Hill, Napeon Sea Rd, Peddar Rd, Warden Rd and Breach Candy. They were the lucky ones who were born with silver spoon and had all the amenities of life. Bombay had its complexity too. The sight of its slums and its inhabitants clustered in inhuman conditions was shocking. It was also sad to see the slum dwellers squatting on roads to defecate. Imagine whole families living under one shanty roof where they cooked, married, copulated, bred, and died in appalling condition! My ideology took a drastic turn. I was a changed man.

Bombay with its superbly displayed Victorian architecture at Gateway of India, Kala Ghoda, Flora Fountain, Victoria Terminus, Dhobi Talao, Crawford Market, Pydhoni, Opera House, Dadar and various other places seemed exclusively different. The congestion at Kalbadevi/Bhuleshvar and Masjid Bandar was mind boggling and alarming. You were a nobody, an insignificant mortal among the masses. There were hundreds of them, some in their dhoti attire, just going ahead and indifferent and immune to those around them. You also came across characters like jesters, jugglers, musicians, magicians, eardrum cleaners, snake charmers, fortune tellers, masseurs, physically handicapped and haggard looking beggars, all sorts of vendors and various others. It was amazing to see the berserk crowd, buses, trams and the leisurely paced tongas causing traffic jam. It was also amusing to watch a cow obstruct the traffic. The cow is sacred to Indians and the Hindus revere it. They touched it, kissed it and even fed grass to it. Bombay's hectic train system and its commuters rushing up and down at Churchgate and Victoria Terminus (VT) railway stations baffled me. It was altogether an entirely different world for me.

Bombay also seduced me by its spacious and modern cinema houses. Saturday nights took us to English films at Eros, Strand, Regal, Metro and Sterling while Sunday evenings were reserved for the Hindi ones at Apsara and Maratha Mandir. The Gujarati natak (plays) formed another attraction for me and I would often be seen at Birla or Tejpal theatres where they were performed. The melodious Mohamed Rafi was my idol and I would attend the Rafi nites going all the way from Churchgate to Sion at Shanmukhanand Hall. My liking for the qawals Yusuf

Azad, Abdurab Chaos, Jani Babu and Aziz Naza and their catchy lyrics meant returning to the hostel in the wee hours of the morning after the qawali nites at Patkar and other halls.

Bombay's glamorous restaurants became a matter of routine as I had begun acquiring taste for its Mughlai, Tandoori, South Indian and Chinese cuisine. I also could not resist Bombay's famous bhelpuri, sevpuri, panipuri and raghra that the bhayyas would sell on the roadside or at Chowpaty and Juhu beaches.

The roadside food was not all that hygienic, and I had to be admitted in JJ Hospital at Byculla with typhoid. I had several friends who were medical students at the Grant Medical College (GMC) attached to the hospital and they provided me with a special room meant only for the medicos. There I experienced one of the saddest incidents of my life. One Maharashtrian boy who also had typhoid was brought into the room. He hailed from a poor family and was doing his internship after passing his final MBBS examination. Sadly, the fever escalated, and the youthful doctor passed away. His entire family gathered there and surrounded the body. His parents were uncontrollable and their wailing over the dead body was heartrending. They lighted diwa and performed certain religious rites before taking away the body.

I was completely disheartened by that incident and the room gave me a severe fright. I demanded to be removed to the general ward where death was a common sight, but the ward had a number of patients whose relatives and associates frequented and enlivened the place. I stayed at the hospital for almost a fortnight and was reduced from 51 to 37 kilograms. My typhoid ended horrifically with its aftereffects that had bulk of my hairs disappear. They were falling in bunches and for almost two months I could not take a hair bath. I was prescribed a course of 50 injections but by then enough damage had been done to my otherwise good hair growth.

I resided on the 'B' Road of Churchgate at Jai Hind College Hostel that was located by the side of Hotel Natraj at Marine Drive which commanded spectacular view of the solid buildings that stretched in a row overlooking the highway and Arabian Sea. It was the cynosure of Bombay and at night its illumination transformed it into a breathtaking view that the Bombay public termed 'Queen's Necklace'. We would daily go for evening or after dinner stroll around there. The hostel had mostly the East African boys who were the 'Patels' and 'Shahs' of Kenya and Uganda. There were also the arduous and intellectual South Indians of Kerala and Madras. My acquaintance with all of them grew closer and I was even made to celebrate along with them their colourful festivals of Diwali, Holi, Janmastami, Ganpati and Rakshabandhan when the hostel would hold feast. The cafes and bistros at Churchgate like Venice, Gaylord, Talk of the town, Bombaylis and Napoli became our favourite joints. We would sit there for hours chatting endlessly, listening to music and consuming espresso, at times even beyond midnight.



Bombay's spectacular Marine Drive

One of Bombay's peculiarities is its monsoon when the rains come pouring down and the innumerable umbrellas go abruptly up. It would begin in the first week of June and last till August. Once I happened to pay a friend a visit at his Navjivan Society residence in Bombay Central when there was heavy downpour causing incessant showers that just would not stop. My friend and his family insisted that I stay overnight with them, but I was adamant to return to the hostel. The Navjivan Society compound was inundated with water that had reached chest level high. We found ourselves being pulled by its stream and my friend who was accompanying me to the Bombay Central railway station had his pair of spectacles swept away. It was impossible to reach the station which was just a few footsteps away. We had no alternative but to retreat and I ended up staying at my friend's place for two days. Bombay was declared bandh (closed). Everything had come to a halt as buses and trains did not move and nothing functioned.

The monsoons also remind me of one dull and rainy evening when I had gone to meet another friend at the National College hostel in Bandra. There I accompanied him to a nearby clinic along Gazebo restaurant on Linking Road where we found one shoeshine boy drenched in wet cloths and shivering. He was breathing heavily and passed away within no time. His colleagues on the pavement seemed immune to the tragedy and carried on with their routine as if nothing had happened. When intimated to carry away the body they shrugged off the attendant and suggested to dump it in a municipal van. I was aghast. That incident amply demonstrated to me Bombay's treachery and the callousness of its people.

Somehow the trashy Indian cinema always fascinated me. I even grasped the tricks of its distribution and exhibition trade reading such periodicals as 'Trade Guide' and 'Film Information'. Once as a stargazer outside Shanmukhanand Hall on the occasion of the 1967 Filmfare Award function a friend Rafiq Pirmohamed (now in Dubai) and

I were subjected to laathicharge (battering) by a hawaldar (policeman) when the crowd rushed at Dilip Kumar who had won the best actor award that year for his role in 'Ram aur shyam'. Interestingly some of us at the hostel once even participated in the shooting of a 'C' grade or low budget film 'Ek din adhi raat' starring Sujit Kumar and Kumkum at hotel Blue Nile. We were seated in its dance hall and the dancer Madhumati danced around us to the tune of music that was being played.

Film shooting with its cuts and retakes is monotonous. I was again witness to its tediousness when taken to Rajkamal Studios at Parel to see the shooting of B.R. Chopra's Dharmendra starrer 'Aadmi aur Insaan'. During my latter visits to Bombay my association with Screen's editor Mr. Pillay had me pay a visit to Ranjit Studios at Dadar where the shooting of Manmohan Desai's Amitabh Bachchan starrer 'Parvarish' was going on and availed me the opportunity of a brief chat with the modest Mr. Bachchan in his makeup room. I also attended the recording of film 'Do Musafir's duet by Mohamed Rafi and Lata Mangeshkar under the baton of Kalyanji Anandji at Tardeo's 'Song Recording Studio'.

My visit to the extraordinary Tajmahal reminded of the time when we would marvel at its photographs. During my Cutch and Kathiawad (Saurashtra) trip the hotel in Bhavnagar where I had been staying held bhajan at its roof top on amas (full moon) night and there I was coaxed into smoking. It felt good and I, the teetotaler, went on to smoke a packet a day for almost 25 years till dissuaded by ill health. After repeated trial the distasteful habit came to its end in July 1992.



The extraordinary Taj-Mahal at Agra

I was overwhelmed with emotions by the sight of Khojawad at Jamnagar, my ancestral town. What a contrast between the cosmopolitan Zanzibar and the traditionalist orthodox spot in India's remote Jamnagar! My grandfather Jaffer

Mohamed Sheriff had built the mosque at Jamnagar. His photograph adorns the wall of the Khoja Ithnashri Boarding House along with those of Nasser Noormohamed, Dawood Haji Nasser and Jetha Ghokal. It made me feel proud.

Typical of India is its concentration of Khojas in one place known as Khojawad where side by side stand the mosque and jamaatkhana. The Khojas there are referred to as vaddi Jamaat (Ismailis) and nindhi jamaat (Ithnashris) rather than Ismailis or Ithnashris. In Kutch Kero I had put up at a relative's place where strangely one brother was Ismaili while another Ithnashri. In the evenings when one visited the jamaatkhana another went to the mosque.

In Bombay Khojas reside at Dongri. I used to perform Ramadhan amaals at Dongri's Palagalli mosque till four at night when I would go to Nizari restaurant in Bhindi Bazaar to take my dakhu or sahri (last meal before the fast). Bhindi Bazar in Ramadhan enlivens at night. Otherwise for dakhu I used to have sandwiches and tea at the hostel while for iftaar (meal for breaking fast) I would go to a Muslim restaurant across Flora Fountain. During weekends I visited Mohamedali Road and Bhindi Bazaar to feast on malpua, firni and faluda at Suleman Osman's sweet stall along Minara Masjid. On Eid day after the Eid namaaz at the Palagalli mosque I would treat myself to shirkhurma at Nizari and then proceed to Bombay Central where there was a dingy restaurant that was famous for its jukebox with old records. I would sit there for hours listening to Rafi's sad solos as away from family such festive occasions accentuated my loneliness. I returned to my hostel with packets of aflaatoon that I would distribute to my Hindu friends.

In Muharram I attended night majlises at Dongri's Kesar Baag or Bhindi Bazaar's Mughal masjid or Babarali imambara. The shame ghariba majlis were held at Rehmatabad cemetery (where the film actress Meena Kumari (Mehjabeen) is buried) by the side of Arambaag (Khoja cemetery) at Ray Road in the Mazgaon area. At dusk candles placed on graves would be lighted creating dim and sombre atmosphere. After the majlis beggars in expectation of alms queued up the route from the cemetery. The best Muharram that I ever experienced was the 1969 one in Karachi where I attended daily four majlises of Allama Rashid Turabi. It began with the Nishtar Park majlis at 5 in the evening followed by the 8 pm one in Khalikdina Hall, the 9.30 pm one in Bara Imambara and finally in Azakhane Zahra or Irani Hall at around midnight. On Ashura day after the morning majlis at Nishtar Park the big julus procession stretching for almost a mile would commence from there and culminate in the evening at Bara Imambara in the Khoja vicinity of Kharadhar.

The one person Khoja Ithnashris need be proud of is Mohamedali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, for he was one of them. I feel particularly more inclined because the Jinnah family hailed from somewhere around Jamnagar though they had shifted long back to Sindh where Mohamedali was born in Karachi. During the independence movement Mohamedali Jinnah was stationed in Bombay. Jinnah had married a Parsee from Bombay. She died also in Bombay before the partition and was buried

in Arambaag, the Khojah Ithnashri cemetery. With the partition of the subcontinent most of the Khoja Ithnashris from India moved to Karachi, Pakistan.

I have had the rare opportunity of crossing the Indo-Pak border twice, once through Vagha (Amritsar) and another through Husainiwala (Ferozpur). The strange ways of the world places Pakistan on one end and India on the other. I found myself in-between on no men's land or what has been pronounced 'International Zone' and could see both the Pakistani and Indian soldiers guarding their respective borders. It made me emotional for it reminded me of the partition that had led to the reciprocal genocide that saw the massacre of thousands and displacement of millions. I was born around that period of the partition and had grown up with the notion of heroics of Mahatma Ghandhi and Qaide Azam Mohamedali Jinnah. I also made a point of visiting in homage to the Samadhi (crematorium) of Gandhiji at Rajghat in Delhi and the makbara (mausoleum) of Jinnah at Mazare Quaide Azam in Karachi.



The Khoja mosque at Jamnagar built by Jaffer Mohammed Sheriff



The childhood heroes, Jinnah & Ghandhi



The Khoja mosque at Palagalli, Bombay

Travelling by train in the subcontinent is exhilarating and adventurous. Along the route the view has its scenic attractions-the Kanbi (farmers) and govar (shepherd) of Gujarat in their huge feta(turbans), the bearded Sardarji of Punjab or the white capped Bhayya of Uttar Pradesh absorbed in their routine, their ladies in colourful and traditional garments, the cattle grazing on pastures, the peacock spreading its lovely feathers to display those eye catching patterns; such images created a beautiful scenario. The train halts at various stations which are crowded and noisy. Passengers move to and fro with their luggage carried by themselves or the coolies. The stations abound in hawkers selling food, drinks, and different items. The compartments are full of passengers with characters who can be real fun to be with. They chat, play cards, or sing songs for their amusement.

I had my own adventures too. In Pakistan I happened to travel from Karachi to Lahore on my friend's (Pakistan based Tanzanian) ICFS (International Council for Foreign Students) card that enabled me concessionary fare. I was also carrying a Bombay friend's suitcase with the imprint 'K.K. NAIR, BOMBAY' inscribed on it. The ticket checker caught me red-handed for travelling on somebody else's card. I was not only made to pay the full fare but even the penalty. I felt really ashamed though I was actually entitled to a lesser fare but had forgotten my card in Bombay.

On another instance when travelling from Lahore to Karachi the train had halted at Multan and I needed to go to the washroom. I was in a third-class compartment and the train packed with passengers. It was just impossible to move out and the only outlet possible was through its narrow windows. I could see the locals swiftly penetrating through it and was prompted to venture the move. While with great difficulty I managed to come out it was just impracticable for me to get back. I was helpless and panicky as the train was about to leave. Eventually I got lifted and pushed from outside as my co passengers within the compartment pulled me inside. I had made an ass of myself and felt really embarrassed.

In the nineteen fifties and sixties the best form of journeying was by ship. The BI (British India) liner with its vessels like Karanja and Kampala made voyage all the way from Capetown to Bombay and in between anchored at various ports. The departure at Mombasa port where passengers from Kenya and Uganda boarded created overwhelming scenes as family members and relatives parted and bid each other farewell.

The bunks below created congestion unlike the comforts of cabin provided to ticket holders of first and second class. The passengers befriended each other and relaxed on the deck listening to news and music on radio or played cards. In the early morning passengers with their towels queued up outside the washroom. The meal at the ship was a sumptuous affair and included rich dessert and all sorts of fruits. The passengers packed into the ship shop that opened for specific hours and sold latest items at duty free price. At night it would be a gala affair and passengers treated to film shows, music parties, bhajans, qawallis and tombola on the deck.

The youngsters looked forward to disembark at the exotic Seychelles that was well known for its notoriety. The Muslim passengers exulted at the ship's arrival in Islamic Karachi symbolized by Pakistan's green flag with its crescent sign raised on the ship mast. The poor Hindu passengers irrespective of their nationality were denied entry in those days and envied their Muslim counterpart as they disembarked. They boarded back with packets of dry fruit that was Pakistan's specialty.

During my several trips the one sorrowful happening that I witnessed in the ship was the death of a small boy aged nine or ten years. He hailed from a Muslim Punjabi family of Nairobi and was on his way back via Mombasa along with his mother and younger brother, but death snatched him away. Sometime in the afternoon the ship came to a sudden halt, its flag lowered to half-mast and we passengers and crew made to gather at the deck where the shroud wrapped body was placed in the middle. There was pin drop silence and only the sound of waves crashing against the ship could be heard when the ship captain moved forward towards the body. Everyone seemed choked up as he removed his cap and performed the salute. Eventually the crew lifted the body and lowered it into the sea. The ship then sounded its siren to resume its journey and the gathering dispersed. The body floated on the endless Indian Ocean while the heartbroken mother and the sad and stunned younger brother stared at it in disbelief as it drifted away. It was a deeply distressing scene.

On arrival at Bombay it would be chaotic as passengers packed their trunks and fastened their luggage while the impetuous Bombay porters or coolies in red shirt spread out themselves in every corner of the ship. As students we carried saleable items that fetched reasonably good price in Bombay and enabled us extra resource. As usual I would be panic struck and while others swiftly cleared themselves through the Bombay customs, I found myself trapped repeatedly having my items impounded or levied with severe duty and penalty.

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