

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Walking out of one border and before entering the next one; those few yards that we had to cover on foot; the few steps that humans have prohibited for themselves: No Man's Land! Leaving behind the barred country named India and before entering the one caught behind another set of iron rods, the one that is Pakistan, this handful of free land. Protected from the waving tricolor and the shining moon and star, these few grains of land which is not trampled by the boots of soldiers; where on the night between August 14 and 15 hundred of candles are lighted so that the message of love can reach from one side to the other. Safe from human selfishness, misunderstanding and arrogance, Oh fistful of dust Red Salute to you!

What was coursing down our minds and hearts, we the twenty four delegates who were crossing the Atari Wagah border on foot? Before us was the high gates on which was written "Baab-e-Azadi", (Door of Freedom)! The gates of this door shall open for us and then close again. Beyond this gate are imprisoned those people who shall embrace us for emerging from one prison and entering another, smile and welcome us and ask "Dear ones! Hope these few steps of freedom have not tired you out; sit down, take stock of your new prison, get used to it; rest a bit before you proceed."

In this prison I have to stop at several destinations. There is Faiz Chacha's house and Manto's daughters, my maternal grandfather's grave is here and from here some 45 years back a very old Sikh lady had requested my mother to get for her a few crystals of Lahori salt." And then here I might find traces of the road traversed by Sajjad Zaheer in the hope of reaching a Red destination. I shall meet people who had joined him, those whom he had shown the way, they who had been influenced by him. Would they still be walking the same road? If they were how would I greet them? How explain why I had lagged behind?

Lost in thoughts I had no clue about the questions asked by the custom officers on both side, the documents stamped. From a distance was visible a group of people carrying garlands of red flowers-- 'red!' and then rang the slogan 'Pak Hind Dosti-Zindabad! Zindabad!' Our steps hurried from the feeling of insecurity of the free land to be enclosed in the other cage. Then probably somebody pointed me out to a pretty little adolescent girl who ran up to me, put a garland round my neck and shouted "Sajjad Zaheer's Road! Our Road!" I felt pity for myself. What had I been so worried for? This was a familiar road because it had the footprints of so many who belonged to me. Even though the destination was far and the walk difficult, I had no fear of losing my way for the road was familiar.

Walking with the group of those who had come to welcome us I turned and cast a look of despair at that bit of free earth and said "Forgive me dear friend. You are precious and close to my heart but as long as all man-made borders are not broken down, I am forced to live in one or the other prison; please understand I cannot survive on lifeless soil, I need living people for existence!"

Many cars were waiting for us and stuffed with us and our bags they move towards Lahore. There was a trade union leader sitting in our van with a favorite sentence he would speak anywhere and everywhere.

If one said, "Why are the fields around lying barren?" he would reply "What else is expected when imperialism rules?" "The roads are bad here" would get the same reply. Thankfully nobody commented on our late arrival or else he would have held imperialism responsible for the mist as well.

We had faced an uncanny situation. Our bus that should have been moving at 80 km/hour was crawling at 20km/hour because of the mist. The severe cold was sending all of us to answer nature's call again and again. The bus would stop every two hours and men who are always in a majority in any delegation would walk a few steps and relieve themselves. It is difficult for women to do so in spite of the thick fog. Me and Tripta Wahi took a long walk during one stop but found no bathroom. We decided to take V.N. Narayan into confidence. He is in the Indian Police service and is the author of hard hitting, honest books like 'Sheher Mey Curfew.' He proved to be worthy of our trust and getting down at the next check post inquired about a washroom. The Sikh policemen clicked his heels, saluted and informed that he can present everything from a roast chicken to a sten-gun but a bathroom is an impossibility. But some sixteen kilometres down the road there was a luxury hotel that would have a clean washroom. In the mist we almost missed this hotel that seemed spooky covered in the fog, rising out alone in a lonely, barren spot. Had anyone asked then 'What does a traveler wish for most ardently?' I would have replied without a moment's delay 'Clean bathroom, hot paratha!' Both were taken care of here and we moved on.

I was sure I would meet Hamid Akhtar chacha in Lahore. Hameed Akhtar chacha was one of the few left of Sajjad Zaheer's companions. Not finding him at the border I had consoled myself that he was not there because of old age. But then when I didn't find him at the restaurant where lunch had been arranged for us, I felt an undefined misgiving rising within me. No one seemed to have any clue about the reason for his absence. He had led the delegation of Pakistani writers who had come to India in November for the centenary celebrations and had promised us that he would be participating in all the events in Pakistan. He had fractured his arm on his return to Pakistan. Was the injury so bad that he was immobile? My uneasiness increased.

I was thinking this out when a few men began arguing rather loudly. The argument soon turned into a verbal quarrel. The hosts were scattered amongst the guests and they now seemed to take a queue and began to talk to us loudly and ask questions about our journey, in an effort to cover up the voices from the other end of the table. A senior journalist from 'Dawn' sitting next to me whispered "How stupid are these boys. Is this the time to quarrel over such issues?"

I tried to save his embarrassment and said "Please do not worry. This happens on our side as well and public showdowns are a common occurrence"

He sighed and said "That is the problem; that this is the usual practice. Differences are not discussed and sorted out with gravity and dignity. Openly airing one's bitterness and calling it internal democracy has been named Leftism."

Another gentleman added quietly "Actually there are so many groups. The saying is 'constructing one's own mosque of a brick and half' but here there are communist parties of a member and a half. Everyone

doubts everyone else and the one under suspicion instead of clarifying his position immediately takes offence and forms a new party.”

“Are they not united even for the centenary celebrations?’ I inquired tentatively.

“Everyone has come together for the centenary. The programmes and functions are being held unitedly, but let us see how long they stay together. For the moment everyone is trying to show off that they have put in maximum effort in organizing the events.”

Trying to think out the situation I moved with the rest of the delegation to the waiting cars. Just as the one that I was seated in emerged from the parking area it collided with the motorcycle of a delivery boy who fell on the road and hurt his hand and knee. A crowd collected as he began to bleed but the interesting thing was that no one called the police nor did they begin abusing and threatening each other. Some people picked up the injured boy, who accepted the thousand rupees our hosts gave him and he was escorted to a nearby hospital. “People here have more sense than us.’ Dr. Vijay Singh remarked, “They know that the police shall not do anything and abuses and threats shall not achieve any result. The best bet in an accident is the doctor, so they are depending on that.”

All the way to the station I pondered on whether the masses of Pakistan were not more sensible than the leftists? Were they not with the party because they knew that the party would not go beyond verbal discussions and shall never come down to the real issues? And then when there are so many of them who is one to depend on? Are there so many groups because the party has been banned almost since after the independence and all left groups had to remain underground? When one has to function underground the dangers of informants and arrests increases many folds. One arrest leads to doubts on the integrity and commitment of one’s own comrades. Was that why the party was so factionalized? This had not happened in India, yet the left was divided into so many parties and each group considered itself more true to the Communist ideology than the other.

That Lahoris love history is proved by the Lahore station which has not been rebuilt or modernized. The station was old, built in the traditional British time construction of public departments with rounded ‘mehrabs’ and long, broad platforms. The train was half an hour late and people roamed the platforms chattering and laughing. So they still had this link with India; no one cared for the delay in the running of trains. The train was coming from Peshawar; it had left Peshawar which was good news; so it would arrive at Lahore sooner or later and once it reached Lahore people would board it and the train would leave and god-willing reach Karachi. How would worrying and grumbling help?

We were booked in two coaches. We were distributing the tickets amongst us when a gentlemen with a salt and pepper beard and white cap walked up to us and said ‘do hold your tickets and keep them safe or else someone might just snatch and be away with them.’ Another thing common with our side; stations are plagued with snatchers and pickpockets.

Irshad Ameen was to escort us till Karachi. He is a couple of inches more than six feet. But even at that he suspects that he might get lost in the crowd. To be recognizable all through the visit in India he carried a coat in one hand. No, not like the way most people carry through winter, on their arm to

protect themselves if the temperature drops. His coat would be in a black cellophane cover, hung on a hanger which he would hold on to with its hook. No one ever saw him wearing the coat so one doesn't know what it looked like. Perhaps he was intimidated by the dust and pollution of India poor man. Now he was with us minus the coat.

Train arrived on time which is to say that it came at the delay that had been announced. Seven of us, which included Kamala Prasad, Khagendra Thakur, Sadiq sahib and me were in one coach. I had been a bit surprised at the division of the delegation and why I had been segregated from the rest of the women but I raised no objections because I wished to have a serious conversation with Kamla Prasad ji rather than be part of the noise and inane conversation.

The train with its route crosses three of the provinces of Pakistan KPK, Punjab and Sindh and is considered one of the good trains of Pakistan. It was an AC coach but there was no water in the bathrooms. So many similarities! Khagendra ji was tired and like a typical Bihari he was very fond of meat and fish, so the lavish lunch which we were served around 5pm he had eaten to his fill. There were no curtains in the coupes and women had brought out sheets and shawls to serve as makeshift partitions and maintain purdah. Khagendra ji's berth was inside one of these coupes. He prepared his berth and within a few moments his rhythmic snores were audible. Others had top berths and they climbed up. Two women were continuously staring at me perhaps because my berth was on the outer side and there was no question of my possessing a sheet or curtain to hang. Irshad Ameen sahib arranged for some kind of a bedding. When I spread the lone sheet and lay down on the thin pillow, pulling the blanket on me they exchanged looks as if to say "Indian! What else can you expect?"

Last night's fatigue brought a quick, sound sleep and when I woke up at about half past five it was to find Kamla Prasad and Khagendra ji ready and dressed up like disciplined comrades. I also got the good news that there was now water in the bathrooms. I yawned and turned over. When I woke up again an hour later the water had vanished. 'Dear woman, when traveling with Namazis do get up and wash before the morning prayers' my heart admonished me. I splashed some water from the mineral water bottle on my face and came out to find tea being sold for ten rupees a cup. On the next station I also came to know that mutton burger was also of ten rupees. "All goods for one price' seemed to be the motto here. The great American influence was visible at least on the market.

Sindh became visible as dawn brought light with it. Dry, flat land, sometimes sandy, at others showing clusters of huge rocks of varied colours, layered with the practiced hand of a tie and dye dyer, white, overlapping the beige, sometimes bright orange and then velvety greens. There was little greenery but where it existed it was deep, eye-soothing green as if the earth had exerted all its love and adoration to produce that green.

Looking outside I felt the presence of a colourful shadow moving with the train; sometimes running on the dry sand, sometimes leaning against the high umbrella of a date palm, resting on the wall of a well where a camel was also seated, sometimes swinging a string of quaintly painted earthen pitchers, sometimes serious, at others smiling with inner merriment.

I jerked my head. Probably the sleep had not really rested me otherwise how can shadows be colourful? I closed my eyes and when I opened them, the shadow had vanished. The other passengers also woke up and began talking to us. One of them was a long haired, slim, good looking young man, travelling to Hyderabad with his sister and parents. The parents seemed like practicing Muslims, with his mother in a Burqa and the father sporting a cap and beard with a black mark on his forehead. The boy played the guitar in the college band, the sister was in high school, very good in studies and wished to be a doctor. The parents had not forced their daughter to wear a veil or stopped their son from playing the guitar. A few others also walked up to us, a few boxes of sweets were opened, some packets of snacks passed around and we discussed the new warmth in India and Pakistan. The atmosphere was the same as in any train journey in India. It may be true that partition is not the solution of any problem but when it has happened isn't it better to accept it and move on from there with our common heritage, roots and culture and more importantly the same problems; is it not better to not keep knocking the crack and keeping it alive and be rational and begin to build bridges?

Sadiq sahib came down, brought two cups of tea and sat beside me. I learnt about his extraordinary background that began with Marathi and Sanskrit passed through Persian and Hindi and spread out to Sindhi and Urdu. As we talked of Sindhi and Persian we reached out to Sufism and found common ground since he was deeply interested in philosophy and I had recently begun researching Sufism. I brought out my diary to make notes of our conversation and after a while I raised my head and found him lost deep in thoughts and right behind him was visible the shadow; sometimes prismatic, then changing to clear white, still like the light falling from the stained glass of a church window on a believer lost in prayer. But there was no diamond glass window behind Sadiq sahib. I recalled I had not got my eyes examined for almost two years now. Probably the number had changed. Then my heart jumped as I remembered that seeing blue, red, yellow green blobs was a sign of eye hemorrhage. I wanted to ask Sadiq sahib whether colourful blobs were also visible to him, but then thought the better of it. He might think that I am slightly mad.

As if the shadow seemed relieved by my decision it stopped oscillating and moving and settled down right before my eyes.

By now the train was 4 hours late and expected to get further delayed. I stopped writing as we entered Hyderabad and began to look outside. This was the city that Sajjad Zaheer had visited several times. He had spent two years of the four year jail term in the Hyderabad Central Jail. He had many comrades here and Comrade Mir Ali Talpur was one of his fellow prisoners. Comrade Talpur had visited Delhi almost fifteen years before and had stayed with me. I expected him to be still staying in Hyderabad and come to Karachi for the Centenary celebrations. This was the land of Sindh where the remnants of man's earliest civilization had been found; where Sufi performing arts are said to have been born that had spread one hand to western Asia and reached out the other towards India. From here had emerged the concept of monotheism and of no-theism, this land is enriched by the great river Indus that has its beginning in the Mansarovar Lake. Satluj and Brahmaputra also begin from Mansarovar, two stormy, uncontrolled rivers that break havoc on the lands and settlements lying on their banks on the way to the sea. But such is the strength of this land that arising from the same lake it persuaded Indus to flow with dignity and grace, checked its turbulent racy movement so that ancient civilizations could thrive on its bank. This is Sindh,

that has provided shelter to all kinds of madness, the insane qalandars and the crazy reds. Shah Lateef has composed poetry in the language of this land and people swear by the novelty of ideas and philosophy of his verse and the language. About this language Sindhi Sajjad Zaheer had written his last long essay to persuade the Indian government to give it the status of a national language of India. Two years after his death this inclusion was done, which meant that Sindhi featured on the one rupee note. Of course now that the one rupee note has gone obsolete no language enjoys the status and Hindi is having a gala time over-riding the linguistic diversity of India.

The city seen just before the train entered the station seemed to have large buildings, spread out bazars and squares. The platform seemed to have the hustle and bustle of a city and the cheerfulness of a small town. We got down and bought the ten rupee burgers. We had been instructed not to call them 'hamburgers' as it might anger the Muslim shopkeeper. The station sold several kinds of delicious meat dishes. In Delhi one would have to go all the way to Jama Masjid to get such delicious kababs.

Ever since Sindh had become visible the female presence had become more pronounced. Working the fields, clay coating the house and feeding the cattle how could women do all this in a burqa. The economic independence of women had to be clubbed with their freedom to work; then she would get down to sorting out all the other problems for herself and for society as a whole. Probably the men too would not have any objections to this arrangement because after all they too need working partners.

One really interesting thing in Sindh is the donkey cart. A small square one, slightly deep in which two or three people can sit, or baggage loaded, with a seat in front for the driver. The donkeys here are sturdier, a little taller, broader and healthier, intelligent looking. They can be white, grey, brown and almost black in colour with a smart gait. Maybe because of the proximity of the Rann of Kutch they had some wild blood in them. The animals are more fortunate than humans because borders do not obstruct their movement.

The train had crawled out of the station and a donkey cart was bobbing on the dirt road between the green fields; a sturdy donkey capering, probably going homewards because the driver had left the reins loose. A young girl in a bright red dupatta was facing the train but was talking and gesturing to the driver. A folk song of Bihar bubbled up in my heart "lali lali duliya me aali re dulhaniya/piya ki piyari bholi bhali re dulhaniya" (Red is the palanquin, red the bride, red the colour of her innocent love)

Sindh! The majority of refugees from India had found a home here, where the tradition of qalandars always beckoned people to new philosophies, taught them to explore life from new angles. Sindh about which Sajjad Zaheer had written "Sindh is not a centre of civilization, it is an ocean of culture which has washed innumerable shores and has scattered such rare pearls on these lands that are priceless." Would my palm be able to hold a few drops from this endless ocean?

My worry was increasing with the train getting more and more delayed. The inauguration of the Karachi chapter was to take place at 4pm and it was already past noon. Khagendra ji was walking up and down the coach as if his constant mobility would lend speed to the train. A senior fellow traveler inquired what our profession was and on learning that all of us were writers he said, "all of you look like poets and writers but this gentleman seems to be a philosopher" His opinion was communicated to Khagendra

ji who stopped marching, sat down and began staring in vacuum. A while later two of our delegation came down and disclosed why I had been separated from the rest. The mineral water bottles of that compartment had been strengthened with Vodka. Some had doubts that I might raise objections and so I was sent with the elders. So, the night through, in the presence of Muslim travelers our delegation had got drunk and openly declared the concept of freedom in India. Calling an explanation from them was Kamla Prasad ji's duty which he was fulfilling in one corner of the coach. In my heart I was praising the tolerance of the Pakistanis.

CHAPTER TWO

The platform had a crowd of people, carrying flower garlands and red flags and holding the Sajjad Zaheer Centenary banner. There were the trade unionists, teachers, writers, journalists and representatives from several communist parties. As we walked in a procession, I thought of Sajjad Zaheer, landing here as an Anglo-Indian, incognito, having left behind all his friends, relatives, a wife and three daughters. He had also left behind an organized communist party, walking into an unknown land to reorganize the cadre of an ideology that may or may not thrive here. Today people influenced by him and his ideology were walking openly in a procession. There was fragmentation, but it was possible that Sajjad Zaheer might become the convergent that would bring these scattered bits together.

A procession carrying red flags was a cause for much surprise for the Indian delegation. We had heard that every government of Pakistan had been repressive towards the left. The present regime too had not shown in any manner that it had had a change of heart towards the left. Our surprise increased when a formal welcome and tea was arranged outside the station by the Mayor of Karachi where all of us were welcomed in the traditional manner of Sindh with 'Ajrak', a Sindhi handwoven and hand printed textile that is wrapped around, worn and gifted as a sign of friendship and appreciation. Could one assume that the Pakistani government has softened towards us? Maybe this generosity is only a way to fool us into surfacing and once exposed can easily be marked?

Zaheda Hina and Raahat Saeed were also present at the station. Zaheda Hina is one of the well-known woman fiction writer and columnists of Pakistan. I have known her for more than twenty years but last year we spent seven days together in Allahabad and Lucknow and had become good friends. Zahida Hina had come to the station to take me to her house; Raahat Saeed was equally insistent that I stay at his house. To sort out matters I suggested that all of us attend the inauguration which was already late and then decide on the night.

I took stock of the city of Karachi on way to the Arts Council. The city seemed very similar to Mumbai, but the Arts Council was spread out with beautiful buildings and broad lawns. It was delightful to see such an arts complex in a country that is considered to be an enemy of all performing arts. Then I saw Hameed Akhtar Chacha.

In the world of literature no one but Pablo Neruda has such an interesting nose. Small eyes which though imprisoned in spectacles manage to throw out sparks of love and warmth and thick lips that have turned grey because of chain smoking spread out all over his face and his eyes vanish as he smiles. If one wishes to see his whole face at a time it is necessary to have only serious discussion with him.

Hameed Akhtar, Sajjad Zaheer's comrade, member of the Pakistan Communist Party, secretary of the Progressive Writers Association in the forties, respected columnist and several other things. He was from Ludhiana [India] and was a close friend and associate of Sahir Ludhianvi. He did not wish to leave India, but conditions were so adverse that he had to cut his roots and migrate to a new homeland. The problems on the journey, rioting and looting, the killing of innocents and then a long stay in the refugee camp with the let down and disloyalty of the expected supports and then begging for help from unknown people; all broke him to the extent that he was able to forgive everyone and blamed only his nearest. For a communist nearest to his heart is his commitment; he piled on the blame on his ideology and withdrew from it. When Sajjad Zaheer reached Lahore he had high hopes of support and help from Hameed Akhtar, but was told clearly that he had no wish to be associated with either the movement or the organization. Till today he is grateful that Sajjad Zaheer persuaded him to trust Marxism again, gave him back the ideology, commitment, confidence and capability to walk with his head held high and consider himself human.

Hameed Akhtar Chacha walks straight as a rod which very few people do at eighty. His built is broad and heavy, but walks fast and presses the earth with each step. He has spent a portion of his youth in Mumbai. Had he stayed on in all possibility he would have posed a challenge to Prithviraj Kapoor and would have been a possible contender for the role of Akbar the Great in Mughal-e-Azam. His mother tongue is Punjabi which is why while speaking Urdu the openness of Punjabi accent merges with his warmth and lends another dimension to his attractive personality. He starts a conversation without any reference or background and begins where he had left the last time he had met one which may have been a few days or several months. When he was in India to participate in the Sajjad Zaheer Centenary, as the leader of the Pakistan delegation, he had launched my book 'Mere Hisse Ki Roshnai'. But he was unable to read it since it was written in Devanagari. He embraced me now saying "Noor has your book come in Urdu in India" I nodded my head and he continued "So give me my copy."

"Hameed chacha it is in my suitcase."

"You should have kept a copy for me in your handbag." Not a word of concern for the tiring journey, not one of appreciation for coming straight to the venue of the inauguration in two day old clothes and 48 hours of travelling. All he wanted was the book. But then that is how comrades are; concerned only with work; yes this dryness sometimes causes unhappiness, often causes isolation but work continues; and that is what survives; that is what brings the change and that is what keeps us all going even after setbacks, even after counter-revolutions, even after what seems like a dead end- we keep working because we know there is a world beyond that wall. My eyes mist as I embrace him again and whisper in his ear "First thing tomorrow morning Hamid chacha." He is a bit surprised at the second hug but nods his head at the assurance.

Next morning, I hand him the book and he sat reading it in the first row absolutely unconcerned with the speakers or the papers being presented in the seminar. He vanished for about an hour in the afternoon session and when he returned I learnt the reason for his hurry to get the book. Putting a hand on my shoulder he said "Noor I have just talked to my publisher in Lahore who wishes to publish your book as

soon as possible.” Before I could express my joy and gratitude a young man butted in “This is a very good and fast publisher. Inshallah your book shall be published within a month.”

Hameed chacha turned around and stared at him, then looked him up and down, wore his glasses and stared at him again to convince himself that he was looking at the same being with or without glasses and then said with a serious face “You would know about your Allah, for the moment it is me who wants the book to be published in Pakistan.”

A number of people walk up and introduced themselves; comrades, trade unionists, writers and journalists. I was busy shaking hands when I felt someone’s hand on my back. A slight tremble in the hand told me that the person was elderly who considers me close. People surrounding me also stepped back in respect and I turned with a question in my eye towards the owner of that rough, boney hand. Two heavily lidded eyes, a slightly damp sight, a long, parrot like nose, a Sindhi cap on the head and a very thin frame wrapped in an ajrak.

“I----actually-----.” He began and was cut short by a younger comrade “This is Comrade Sobo Gyanchandani.” Before my eyes flashed the various pictures of his work and personality that had formed in my head. Sobo Gianchandani! Communist leader of Sindh, the only Hindu comrade, the revolutionary arrested during the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case, suffering years of jail, even today residing in an interior district of Sindh, close friend of A.K. Hangal and despite all tortures and injustice still standing firm with the Left. How does one meet such a pillar of the left movement? How measure its height? A height that does not intimidate rather encourages to reach out for the sky.

I am against touching anyone’s feet but my hands reached to touch his feet as I said “Comrade Sain---.” Even today I do not know why I touched his feet and why used the word ‘Sain’ for him, the Sindhi form of addressing a respected senior. He held me before I could reach his feet. Were his eyes now watery? “Daughters should not touch feet. Welcome to Pakistan!” How proud he was to be a Pakistani, how warmly he was welcoming me to his homeland. A representative of a great civilization, who had refused to migrate to India with the other Hindus because where they were going might have a majority of Hindus and lot of Sindhis but where there would no Sindh! And how was he to exist without the fragrance of the soil of Sindh?

Before partition the Sindhi Hindus had controlled the economy and the market and were rich. Most Sindhi Muslims were either craftsmen or peasants with small land holdings. The communist view is that the partition became for the Muslims a means of getting out of the tangles of debt which often would last several generations. The struggle was more economic than communal. Whatever it was now Hindu landowners can be counted on finger tips and the count would begin with Sobo Gianchandani.

In his speech that evening he rejoiced at the deteriorating condition and oppression of the masses believing it to be a good sign for the left, because it would help to consolidate the ‘have nots.’ We should get alert and careful when a bourgeois government claims to be influenced by our ideology because these are tactics to show us greener pastures, divide our cadre, dim our clarity about the destination of our movement and most importantly shall aim to hijack our principles, our slogans and our grass root work. His immediate reference was to the interest shown by General Musharraf’s wife

recently in the left ideology. But he was also hinting at the way the left in India had given up on mass movements for change and was indulging and celebrating electoral politics. That he could say this while Sitaram Yechuri of CPIM and Kamla Prasad of CPI were sitting on the dais spoke volumes about his faith in his commitment and confidence in his ideology.

There was a sudden commotion in the crowd and Raahat Saeed walked up on the stage with A.K. Hangal. Comrade Sobo and Hangal embraced like the banished idols of Ka'aba would embrace the walls and doors of their home. The hall resounded with claps and a tear choked voice raised the slogan "Pak Hind Dosti Zindabad." The gathering repeated the slogan several times. Sajjad Zaheer had asked both to migrate to India. One of them had said Yes and the other had said No, and in this obedience and disobedience of the General Secretary's instruction two bosom friends had been so separated that a meeting had become possible only now after 56 years.

Time seemed to have stopped, the night was descending, the stream of flowers, gifts, love and red salute was unending. My body was tired but the brain was alert and refusing to accept fatigue.

The delegation was called up on the stage and each one introduced and Kamla Prasad ji as leader of the delegation spoke. The Urdu speaking members of the delegation had warned everyone not to speak in difficult Hindi. Comrade Kamla Prasad was alert in the beginning; but as he got emotionally charged he began to use more and more Sanskrit words. How was it that the audience was clapping at all the right junctions and issues? Is it possible that commitment crosses the barriers of language and creates a resonance in the hearts of the listener? Everyone after the session insisted that his was the most meaningful speech.

Ali Javed the Deputy Leader of the Indian Delegation began with praising the fact that he was hearing the word 'comrade' much more than he did in India so according to him the left was more alive in Pakistan than in India. I was a bit surprised at his statement because the area where I work, which is the remote Himalayas this prefix to one's name is considered a term of both respect and identification. At least I am always addressed as Comrade Noor. I said as much in my speech and was happy to see that a number of people I met after the function addressed me as Comrade Noor. I have been through the stage when I reveled in being addressed as Sajjad Zaheer's daughter, then came the time when I lashed out for my own identity and later learnt to accept both my relationship with Sajjad Zaheer and the relationship the person introducing me had with Abba with a smile and quiet warmth. Comrade Noor is the way I have always liked to be addressed and always shall.

Vibhuti Narayan and Ali Javed accompanied me to Raahat Saeed's house while the rest of the delegation left for PILER (Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research) where they would be staying.

Raahat Saeed's is a strange house. The religious divide is absent here and those creating or believing it are looked down upon. But the Shia Sunni divide is present with a vengeance. Raahat bhai is a Shia and his wife Deeba is a Sunni and both believe that their sect is the better and higher Muslim. Raahat bhai considers the Moharram ritual with its Nauhakani and Marsiya as culture and any tradition that his wife Deeba adheres to he immediately labels religious and hence condemnable. Thus, he is cultured and she is religious. Both began an argument within minutes of our landing there that gradually heated up.

Sajjad Zaheer had taught us from early childhood that the lady of the house is its real master. I decided to side with Deeba though Raahat Saeed had a lot of support in Ali Javed who is a Shia and Vibhuti Narain who being a Hindu is a Shia supporter. Both were siding with Raahat bhai and to support all three were several bottles.

I had heard that Josh Malihabadi, who was a regular consumer of alcohol was so distressed in his last years without his daily quota in Pakistan that he switched to drinking black tea, perhaps believing that though not of the same character it had the same colour. The conditions are not the same anymore. Pakistan might be an Islamic country but there was no dearth of wine or any constriction on its consumption. I was nodding with sleep so Deeba and her daughter in law laid the table early. Raahat bhai's daughter in law has completed her MBA and has recently had an extremely weepy baby.

The men got up, a bit unstable on their feet and Ali Javed scolded me for negating his statement publicly. "You have every right to praise Pakistan, but why find fault with India. I am a nationalist, why should I tolerate it?"

Pat came his reply "No proper communist can ever be a nationalist."

I was shocked into silence. Since childhood I have heard that a communist is always a nationalist. Including the Left in his Government, Dr. Manmohan Singh had also remarked in his first speech as Prime Minister 'we might have ideological differences with the Left but there can be no doubt about their love for the nation.' I also recalled one of the speeches of Balraj Madhok, BJP MP in which he had said that the very concept of Communism is anti-national. How was our Deputy Leader voicing the same thoughts? I was hurt at the presence of these thoughts in a delegation that had come to participate in the Sajjad Zaheer centenary celebrations who belonged to both India and Pakistan, who loved both equally, who dreamed of freedom for both because the people residing in both were the same masses, their struggles were the same, their oppressors were the same and most importantly their road of fighting the oppressors was the same. The cadre of our party has embraced this ideology in the hope of reaching the red destination. Then who are these who have become their leaders and are proving the masses wrong?

I shifted my brain to the immediate problem and began inquiring about friends and acquaintances. I especially wanted to know about Comrade Mir Mohammad Talpur, a comrade who openly used this prefix before his name from the moment he had joined the Red Caravan, Sajjad Zaheer's co accused and fellow prisoner in the Hyderabad [Sindh] jail. Leading a protest that had been fired at, he had been wounded by six bullets. Five had been removed but the sixth had been so embedded in his spine that it was dangerous to meddle with it. He still carried it in his back and showed it off like a medal. It was also the reason for his left arm being paralyzed. I had met him in 1986 when I had accompanied Comrade Sibte Hasan's dead body who had passed away in India. Comrade Talpur had later visited Delhi and stayed in my small flat and three flat mates. Then I changed jobs and towns and lost touch with him. Twenty years later I am again in the same city. Shall I be able to find the other end of the lost thread?

I asked Raahat bhai how was one to establish contact with Comrade Mir Mohammad Talpur. "Which Comrade Talpur?" he asked nonchalantly. So, my heart had been right; Comrade Talpur was no longer

with us. Still I needed a confirmation and Raahat bhai replied dryly “Yes yes, he died quite a while back.” Obviously, he wasn’t very close to Comrade Talpur but this kind of indifference towards long standing, honest and committed comrade annoyed me.

By the time we went to bed, the horizon was turning grey. Dawn was creeping in but sleep was miles away from me. Comrade Talpur’s face, his laughter peeping from behind the lush white mustaches was vivid before me. I remembered I would tease him about them, “Why do you dye your hair and not your mustaches?” and he had burst out laughing “I do not colour my hair. What can I do if my mustaches have turned white before my hair? You know it is said in Sindh that grey hair proves intelligent and white mustaches denote stupidity.”

“But you are so intelligent; this should not have happened to you.” I continue to tease him.

“This is what you think but he does not believe you or me.”

“Who ‘he’?”

“Allah, who else.” He replied with a straight face and then we both burst out laughing at Allah’s stupidity. This had happened on our way out from the Indian National Museum walking down Janpath. Had I hoped that the laughter and walks with him would now happen on the roads of Karachi and Hyderabad?

I turned and tried to sleep. There were two chairs in the room and I felt someone sitting on one. I sat up. Normally I never leave my clothes unfolded, but I must have been so tired that I had dumped them on the chair. It must be yesterday’s clothes that were now taking a form and making fun of my untidiness. There was nothing on the chair. Strange! I shifted a bit; maybe it was the light falling from the windowpane. There was a loud knock on the outside door followed by ‘coming’ in Raahat bhai’s voice, then footsteps going down and coming up. It was probably the milkman. Everything was normal and unexciting so why was I seeing these spectral lights and shadows that seemed to take a more and more concrete form?

I went back to the bed and closed my eyes. Suddenly I felt a kind of peace descend over me like a stuffy, still night stirred by a mild, cool breeze, like someone presses cool palms on burning hot eyes, like a friend without asking strokes a throbbing forehead with soft fingers and from the dry, tangled hair sweeps the pain away. Was there someone sitting beside my pillow trying to put me to sleep? No! This was something else that was gathering my wandering thoughts and putting them in order, straightening out the knots and categorizing my emotions and experiences so that I could evaluate my impressions and my imagination. It was not putting me to sleep; it was trying to waken me up!

CHAPTER THREE

The seminar began from that day. Three books on Sajjad Zaheer and my 'Mere Hisse Ki Roshnai' in Urdu, published in India were launched. Kamla Prasad presented a book in Hindi "Sajjad Zaheer: Aadmi aur Adeeb". A book on Sajjad Zaheer, published in Hindi in India was reason for astonishment and I was astonished at the astonishment, thinking how powerful is the propaganda of the separatists; even the intellectuals believe that because Sajjad Zaheer wrote in Urdu and was a Muslim he would not have followers in India. I wondered what would be the level of their astonishment if they were told about the writers of Malayalam, Tamil, Bengali and Marathi who considered Sajjad Zaheer as their guide.

Hameed Akhtar gave a very nice and personal speech. I had come to this event so that I would be able to find some facts about the eight years that Sajjad Zaheer spent in this country. I was hoping that the papers presented at the seminar would shed some light on this period. Strangely enough Abba had himself never tried to pen down those years. There seemed to be no other way but to visit and find out. But the papers that I was listening to were superficial and more inclined to a romantic picture that seemed coloured more with their imagination than facts. Then a gentleman read out a paper that dwelled for three long pages on the fact that though from a rich family Sajjad Zaheer made so many sacrifices for the movement. I recalled how one day all of us were at dinner and Ammi had cooked Gosht Do Piazza that Abba loved and he began telling us about 'veal ala onion' a French dish that is meat cooked in onions. I couldn't resist remarking "Abba you are so fond of delicacies and gourmet dishes, but we eat them so rarely. Really you have made great sacrifices for the cause." Abba who usually pondered for quite a while before replying turned to me immediately and said "But I have not made any sacrifice. I did what I thought should be done. It would have been sacrifice if I had forsaken my desire and practiced law or taken up some other profession. The one who has made a sacrifice is your mother. She never asked me to change my way, rather she made my way her way."

What kind of people are these who were trying to attire a man in the sacrificial robe for the decisions that he had taken with confidence and commitment. I am always creating visions perhaps because I have been in theatre for a long while. Abba emerged before my eyes as someone being forcefully pushed up the pedestal of self-renunciation and sacrifice while he was beating his hands and feet around trying unsuccessfully not to be idolized.

I pushed my rambling thoughts away and tried to concentrate on the paper. It would have been better had I continued day dreaming. Now this gentleman was ruining the fact that Sajjad Zaheer's daughters had not received even a small portion from the huge land holding and palatial family houses.

I was disgusted and came out of the hall. A group of shalwar kameez clad men were standing nearby, their maroon coloured caps proclaiming them to Sindhis. I was making up my mind to walk up to them when one of them broke away from the groups and came to me. He put his hand on his chest and bowed; I extended my hand and he after a moment of hesitation held it in both hands and said "One of our elders has a photograph of you in his room and he says you are his niece. You may remember him; he is-----."

"Com. Mir Mohammad Talpur." I completed him. Tears held in check since last year now filled my eyes. "I learnt only when I came here."

He looked at me a bit surprised “He often talks about you.”

“Talks! Did you say ‘talks’? You mean-----?”

“Yes, yes! Oye! Come up here. Look Noor Behen thought Com. Talpur has passed away” The rest also came close and informed me that not only is Comrade alive and well he is also active. Recently he had led a protest for the restoration of democracy in the country.

Politics and ideology has undergone so many somersaults recently and so many mental and social pressures are at play that one often meets a close associate only to find that they have done such a roundabout that they seem to be strangers. In such a situation if one is informed that a friend is still steadfast on commitment and belief one wants to hold the informant to heart. With joy also came anger at Raahat bhai. Could he not understand how close I was to Comrade Talpur? If he did not know he could very well have said so.

After lunch the afternoon session began, chaired by Poshni sahib. Nine men and a woman had been the primary accused in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case. He was the youngest and now at 81 the only one alive. He is slim tall, extremely good looking, races up the steps to the stage. When he laughs his whole being sways; his Urdu is as good as his English. In his speech he explained that what was termed as a conspiracy was actually not a conspiracy at all. The plan put forward by army general Akbar Khan and rest of the officers of the army had been rejected by Sajjad Zaheer the General Secretary of the communist party of Pakistan. When the plan was rejected and never brought into use, how could it be a conspiracy by any definition? It was the government who had hatched a conspiracy because it was frightened by the growing power and popularity of the left. It was named conspiracy so that without concrete proof or accusation these ten people and so many of the cadre could be held prisoner.

Since I had to discuss several things with Poshni sahib I fixed up a meeting over lunch at his house, which is in the poshest neighborhood of Karachi- Defense! The entire delegation was completely exhausted after the conference. And one can imagine the condition of the organizers and the hosts; so the comrade who was to accompany me came three hours late and instead of lunch we reached Poshni Sahib’s house for evening tea. I was a bit apprehensive that he would be like my army officer uncle and I would have to survive a lecture on late comers. Thankfully Poshni sb had spent two years of his imprisonment with Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Sajjad Zaheer and was now more of a writer than an army officer. He took me inside narrating a joke on late comers and introduced me to his wife and two very good looking daughters.

Third time I addressed him as Poshni sahib’ he gave me half a smile and said “Let me tell you an incident. I had seen your father a couple of times but when I was told that we would be in the same prison I was elated. Now was the time to learn Marxism from him. I got the opportunity when I saw him digging the flower patch in jail. I went up to him and said “Comrade Zaheer-----.” He turned, looked me up and down, smiled and said “My close friends call me Banne bhai.” Since then I began addressing him as Banne Bhai. Won’t you call me Chacha?” His laughing, brown eyes were shining. Were they moist? For what? That we were once one country, where the heart of every individual beat for freedom, a common struggle, a unified yearning or was this pain speaking of something else: the story of one goal,

one emotion, a will to bring a change, a fight for equality and justice and the strength that would emerge after this change, an energy that would fuse the sky touching heights and the earth trailing chains; the energy that was allowed to dissipate without being used, that was dispelled before reaching its zenith; that returns like the fragrance of a beautiful memory that neither brings joy nor ignites a ray of hope.

His wife perhaps to help us control our emotions announced “Let us sit down to tea else the fish fingers would get cold.” This was a temptation difficult to give up. In India one gets very good fish in seaside towns but here I had yet to sample Karachi fish. The tea table had so much food on it with dishes almost falling over each other and breaking the poor table back. Chachi herself put a spoonful of each in my plate. The fish was good but was not Hilsa. This sea fish that is called *Ileesh* in Bengal comes to the fresh waters of Ganga and Indus to multiply and enriches the nets of the fishermen. In the town of Hoogly, in Bengal I have seen these fishermen overturning nets full of shimmering silvery *Ileesh* on the golden sand of Ganga and a shout go up in the crowd of umbrella holding, dhoti clad Bengali babus “*Eshe gechhe! Eshe echhe! Aachhe, Aachhe! Ileesh Aachhe! Ki bhaalo, tatka Ileesh go!*” [They are here! They are here! Yes yes! There is *Ileesh*! Oh what good, fresh *Ileesh*!]. Is there a similar crowd on the banks of Indus dressed in salwar and round caps who would be arguing and comparing yesterday’s catch with today’s?

I saw a number of books on environment and ecology in Poshni chacha’s collection. This seemed to be his favorite topic because he immediately warmed to the subject and began explaining how the Indus bed was continuously rising because of silting and getting polluted from the untreated waste being dumped into it from the factories, drains and sewage of the settlements around it. It is difficult to believe that it was once the life vein of a prosperous civilization thriving with agriculture, arts and cross country trade. Both Ganga and Indus emerge from the Himalayas, one turned the central Indian plains green and blooming while the other turning west had to pass through dry, desert regions. At the near end of life when we look back and reflect we understand that we are what we are because of the choices we made, the turns we selected, the struggles we supported.

Then he told me that a huge dam is being planned on Indus and every city and town of the three provinces from the four is protesting against it. If a hundred feet deep dam was constructed what would be left of the river to irrigate Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Was the worship of rivers a means to save them? Is some religion necessary to keep life green and robust? But how decide the amount that is necessary? How much would keep it blossoming or turn it to dust? We have held on to the benefits of religions and seen the land divided and re-divided. We have also seen the destruction of culture and civilization, the breaking of hearts and murder of souls when religion ran wild; today religion is the cause of communalism, terrorism and riots. What is more important, saving the rivers with the help of religion or giving up on faiths and accepting human beings as equals?

The evening function was scheduled at NIPA (National Institute of Public Administration). The night approached and the sky blackened allowing the stars to spread out like diamonds; an evening with the mild pleasant breeze of the seaside mid- winters. Pakistani writers and friends were unwilling to let go any of us; someone could be seen pulling Kamla Prasad ji to one side another was unwilling to let go Chandrakant Devtale. What love was this that was held captive by walls built by the state? Young writers

had formed their own group in one corner. How the heart wished that there would be no dawn to this night.

When the function began formally a Maulana was asked to recite from the Quran. I imagined that in a gathering of Left writers someone would protest and there would be some argument. But no one raised any objection and most covered their heads with a handkerchief or a dupatta. We were guests and could naturally not cross the limits of politeness. But when I was asked to speak I could not stop. I felt that in a place where Sajjad Zaheer had tried so hard to unfurl the red flag did we not even have the right to protest the unnecessary pushing down of religion down our throats; at least I must clarify my own position. I could not stop myself from singing the International. For the first couple of lines there was silence then one heard the scraping of some chairs and some people stood up. They did not know the Hindi words of this song but they were familiar with the tune. Individuals may move away, take a different turn or die but the movement continues.

Perhaps because of this turn to the left the moderator was a bit angry and began introducing the speakers in such Arabized Urdu that once a writer from Pakistan being invited to speak didn't understand that it was he who was being requested to come to the dais. When this difficult and unpalatable way of introduction continued for a while one of the hosts got up and with great humility asked the moderator to consider the presence of Indians who might not understand. The moderator snapped at him saying 'What can I do? This is the language spoken by the people here.' An argument would have begun but Chandrakant Devtale immediately got up saying 'We are understanding everything that is being said and the hosts need not put themselves to any trouble for us.' The bitterness was tided over and Rajendra Sharma got up to recite his poem.

Rajendra Sharma of Bhopal. I have regularly read 'Vasudha' the quarterly of Indian Progressive Literature in Hindi edited by him and have read some of his poems but was meeting him for the first time. He was also one of the editors of the book named "Sajjad Zaheer: Admi aur Adeeb." In a first impression he had seemed like a dignified, humble person, a good poet and a reliable comrade but not a particularly militant leftist. But that evening my opinion of him changed completely. Rajendra bhai is short, on the plump side, with a round face that seems to have been drawn with a compass and a close crop of salt and pepper hair that he rarely takes the trouble to comb. He dresses in ordinary khadi kurta and cotton trousers, a waistcoat for the cold and a shawl wrapped for severe cold and a monkey cap. To be honest there is just one 'star quality' in his personality and that is his laughter. First time I had met him I had questioned myself: how could I have heard his laughter before when I was meeting him for the first time. Fifth time I heard him laughing I understood. His laughter 'kit kit kit kit' is like the sound and rhythm of the 'chutki' players of Rajasthan and they put in months of practice, but this is Rajendra Bhai's natural laughter which comes in waves and sprinkles drops of mirth on the people around. If someone can laugh like this there is no need for them to be good looking by traditional standards.

There was a selfish reason for cultivating friendship with him. He carries in one hand a brown bag. The Nawabi culture of Bhopal has the tradition of small hand purses of satin or velvet, decorated with tinsel and zari, with a pull string to shut its mouth and four compartments for four spices of paan- beetle-nut, cardamom, aniseed and cloves. This traditional bag had been modernized by Rajendra bhai, into a

zipped leather pouch but thankfully the inner contents remained the same and were mixed with such finesse that a single pinch would bring with it only one clove, a cardamom and a few grains of aniseed and beetle-nut. He would constantly be found chewing the mixture and offering it around.

That evening my respect for him increased several folds and a misconception from childhood was also cleared. This misconception was about colloquial proverbs. My grandmother would often say 'Why waste poison if one can kill with sugar?' I found this proverb strange because sugar is an expensive item and one might need tons of it to kill while a pinch of poison would be quicker and cheaper. I had decided way back that proverbs of dialects were often if not always, quite stupid. Then the moderator introduced Rajendra bhai in such difficult words that I am sure even Maulvi sahib sitting in the first row did not fully comprehend. Rajendra bhai got up smiling, unhooked the mike and lowered it to his height, opened his diary, brought out his spectacles, wore them, looked at the audience and said "I am Rajendra Sharma; I write in Hindi which is understood in Pakistan." The audience went berserk clapping and applauding him. The poem was in simple Hindi, easily understood with the audience repeating several lines. A secular atmosphere was created and the misconception created by Urdu writers of India that Pakistani's do not like free verse was also removed. Reaction from the heart is never wasted in any genre, and finds its mark in any language.

We were to return to Lahore by train but some of us were of the opinion that if we would hire a bus, we would be able to stop and see other cities and towns of Sindh. The icing on the cake would be stopping for a few hours in Mohenjo Daro! What could be a bigger temptation? The last day in Karachi all delegates were on their own to meet friends and do some shopping. I had to attend a meeting of the Pakistan Mazdoor Kisan Party and a member Zafar Aslam came to pick me up early in the morning. Zafar Aslam is from Badayun, Uttar Pradesh; tall, broad, copper complexioned, sharp eyes and smiling lips. He had come to India as part of the delegation for the Sajjad Zaheer centenary and on our first meeting, he had extended his hand and said "Comrade Behen [sister] I am Zafar Aslam!" If it is true that the process of Marxism shall change with every culture and civilization to facilitate acceptance, then Zafar Aslam's manner of addressing women comrades is a step in this direction. His house is very near the seashore and it is he who took me to the sea beach of Karachi. Zafar Aslam has a wife and five children. Actually he has seven but two are married. Zafar Aslam is a bit embarrassed by his large brood and quickly explains that it was his wife who was responsible because she had been convinced by a friend that leftist husbands can be brought to heel only through the responsibility of a large family. Though that did not happen, five children naturally make his house a welcoming and friendly place.

Zafar Sahab's wife is a very interesting woman. Even after seven children she is very slim, short hair that she colour's burgundy, sharp features and golden complexion. But her surface beauty is no match to the inner one. When she understood that it is not enough to look pretty and have many children to keep the man in control, she began working on herself. She was not very educated, so she attended to that first; took a degree in Arabic, added a teacher's training to it and took a job in a senior secondary school where she is still employed. With that she did not neglect a single aspect of housekeeping and parenting; cooks well, keeps the house tidy, entertains guests both family and comrades, the children are well brought up and well mannered.

Zafar bhai had informed me that she kept her distance from party and politics, is a staunch Muslim and had brought up the children also as staunch Muslims. I wonder why he had never told me that she was so educated in a classical language, is economically independent, is an interesting talker and has an infectious laugh. Zafar Aslam himself was in a good job, but lost it when he tried to form a union in the same company. He then tried his hand at several kinds of business and lost money every time usually because of some comrade who encouraged him to put money in an enterprise and then vanished with the capital. In spite of so much having happened Zafar Aslam did not leave the party nor Bhabhi ever think of leaving him, Zafar bhai never gave up on Marxism nor she turn away from Islam, he never stopped making fun of her Islam and she determinedly continued to reply 'but I cannot become an unbeliever like you!' And never did Zafar Aslam stop trusting his comrades and being cheated by them nor did she ever give up the position from where she could reach out and help him regain courage and confidence.

In one of his articles on Progressive writing, Sajjad Zaheer has written that it is not necessary that every writer should be a member of the Progressive Writers Association. If the writing is progressive and uphold the values of humanity, then the writer though not a part of progressive writing is serving its cause. If Sajjad Zaheer is right, then about women like Bhabhi one has to say that they might be away from the movement and the cause, but they are the ones who prepare the solid ground on which the faraway fliers, traveling in search of a better system, a healthier society, carrying the yearning for equality and justice in their hearts, looking for means to turn their dreams to reality, reaching out to the horizon of promise can return and rest. They are the base, the permanence, the unshakable and that is why they are the fulcrum of the revolution. If not they, who is a communist?

I met Comrade Sufi, the General Secretary of the Mazdoor Kisan Communist Party. On the thin side, with delicate features, slightly longhaired and thin lips which from under the mustaches throw cynical smiles. In the first glimpse, despite the Pathan salwar shirt he seemed more like one of the innumerable nawabs of Lucknow. The manner in which he talks, softly and slowly is also Lucknowi. Not that a Baloch should be loud mouthed and noisy but somehow my brain had conjured a very different image of Baloch men, with big boots, huge 'paags' or turbans, riding a horse and giving calls that would reverberate the crevices of the Bolan Pass. He had a clarity of national and international issues which is difficult to come by and he was in his elements when he talked about the continued oppression of Balochistan. His blue brown eyes glittered as he talked about the domination of Punjab and Punjabi culture on whole of Pakistan. This was the reason that Pakistan was divided and Bangladesh came into existence. The situation apparently has not seen any change.

I was sympathetic but confused; what was stronger, the ties of religion that led to the partition of India? The bonds of language and culture that separated East Pakistan? So many factions and rivalries exist in Pakistan of today; the Baloch Punjabi, the Sindhi Punjabi, Sindhi Pakhtun, Bihari Sindhi, U.P. Sindhi, and innumerable other differences. I heard all that he had to say and then asked him would it not have been better to tolerate one Hindu Muslim communalism and keep India united rather than exist in so many divides? His satirical smile peeped from behind the mustaches. "How would I know? I didn't ask for a separate state." "Then who did?" I inquired a bit surprised.

“You!” a one-word answer that hit me like a slap. The truth! Painful, unbearable, bitter truth! It was the Muslims of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh who decided that they did not wish to co-exist with Hindus; it was they who accepted as the opinion of the entire Hindu community one stupid article by Veer Sarvarkar where he propounded the two-nation theory. Did they also think and decide about the region that would become Pakistan? Did they believe that these areas were inhabited by ‘ignorant’ ‘illiterate’ tribes where they, the educated, cultured Muslims would easily be able to dominate and rule; we would be the first citizens and they the original settlers of this region would be second class people, our serfs and subjects!

He was staring at me as if he could read the turmoil of my heart on my face. Then as if he understood everything he said “But this did not happen and Punjabis dominate every bit of Pakistan. People from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have yet to be integrated and are called ‘Mohajir’. Bangladesh was saved in time, our struggle continues. Let us see till when?” Should the Communist Party of Pakistan have built its base in Baluchistan, Sindh or East Pakistan? Would Abba have been more successful in creating the base that would have emerged as the voice of dissent standing against the continued dictatorships and dominant feudalism and helped the emergence of Pakistan as a democracy that it has still not become? Was Abba a wrong choice because he belonged to none of the provinces of Pakistan and spoke the language that is not spoken as a mother tongue in any portion of this country and it was the imposition of this language that had led to the division of the country in 1971?

All these questions were rumbling in my being as the bus began to move when I clearly heard a voice say “Are you crazy?” From childhood I have often been addressed as ‘crazy’, ‘mad’ ‘nitwit’ ‘lunatic’ ‘deranged’ and so many other juicy adjectives; this was not to make fun of me but in all seriousness. Initially I would get angry but as it continued there was no other way but to live with them. I looked around. Who was this, here in a strange land addressing me so familiarly? There it was the multi-coloured shadow filling the empty box like space that must have once fitted a television set. I jerked as realization dawned that it was following me and that it now had a voice. The shadow became darker and acquired a human form but just that; was it a man or a woman, dark or fair, good looking, attractive, educated! Who was it? The shadow quickly glided down and climbing the seat lithely down from the driver’s exit saying “Everyone will come now so I better go; we’ll discuss this later.”

“So we shall meet again?” I asked happily.

“Of course, how else will you know who I am?”

The form had vanished leaving me with the curiosity to understand what it was. Why was it always there and was it a man or a woman? Suddenly I felt like giving myself a hard punch. Really! It had spoken to me hadn’t it? All I had to do was concentrate on the voice. It was as if the sun decided to exert all its light and warmth and dissipate the mist in the crack of a finger. It was a woman! I should have known it all along; who else but a woman would be generous enough to keep giving and not make any demands in return. Somebody seemed to take a hold of a handful of cobwebs of my brain and shake the sticky threads away. I looked out of the window and there she was, now perfectly clear, laughing at me for taking so much time to reach a destination that was vivid and clear right from the beginning. I had been

talking to the shadow as if it had always had a form, as if it was a long lost friend and picking up threads of an earlier friendship was the most natural thing to do. Now that I was sure that she was a woman would she appear clearer, in a female form or try to confuse me more? What did she really look like? How does she dress and most importantly what would our conversation be like? I turned to look outside for some clues and almost screamed. She was smiling at my shock, yes it was a woman- tall, dark with a wild beauty; slim but with well-endowed hips and tight bust exerting themselves on the bodice for freedom. To be honest I had been experimenting with all kinds of thoughts in the hope of persuading the form to appear. Like a person knows about a coming fever before a doctor, I had come to understand that it was always somewhere around but appeared only when I thought something. I had yet to put my finger on the kind of thought that could make it appear. And yes, I had imagined the form to be that of a woman. Was it my imagination after all that managed to conjure up a shadow, then a form and now a woman?

While I was trying to sort all this, the bus reached PILER where everyone had to collect for early breakfast followed by a discussion. PILER is an NGO just outside Karachi, spread over acres of land and run by Karamat Ali. This NGO is involved in work spread over several areas, they get huge amounts of grants and funds and are constantly accused of various misdeeds by other NGO's. In today's Pakistan where the masses have been so oppressed that they have forgotten to speak, PILER is constantly trying not just to give a voice but also an awareness to the masses to understand their rights and to struggle to achieve them. Karamat Ali is involved in this himself and has a very dedicated group of people with him which includes his daughters. While writing pamphlets, education, justice for workers, women rights are part of work, peace between India and Pakistan is an issue that seems to be closest to Karamat bhai's heart.

There was a two hour long discussion in PILER. Everyone expressed their views on India Pakistan friendship but in spite of several opinions being voiced no one talked of the basic: economics. I voiced my concern over the increased presence of the MNC's. Though an expected development of globalization, seeing that there was a huge mass of both skilled and unskilled labour in South Asia, the governments of all the South Asian countries have not sat down to develop a policy that would be worker friendly and check the exploitation and 'labour shopping sprees' by the rich and developed countries. Trade Unions, Governments and NGO's of the seven countries should sit down and devise such a policy. The second point I made was that today it is not industry which is the back bone of a country's economy. It is the trade which directly affects the economy and strong trade opportunities should be part of any bilateral dialogue. And why should two countries with such a long border be trading in dollars? While barter system would be an ideal form of trading, if that is not possible then at least it can be managed in the currency of the two countries. Karamat Ali himself praised my suggestions and announced that he would take it up in Pakistan.

There were two dinners of the Indian delegation that day. The first was by a rich industrialist whose father had been one of the supporters and helpers of Sajjad Zaheer. The dinner was at Beach Luxury Hotel which has a Jetty extended into the sea where the dinner was held. With water on three sides and thick mangroves that in the dusk light seemed like floating islands of dark foam. The severe lights had been dimmed and replaced with oil lamps. It was a beautiful arrangement under a garb of riches. If

these were leftists and were entertaining Indian leftists then why was so much money being thrown around? Once everyone was welcomed and seated, began the round of drinks for men. Not much liquor is produced in Pakistan but there seems to be no restriction on drinking. The result was that half of the Indian delegation was soon tipsy with scotch whiskey that they seldom get in India. We four women were sitting on a table in a corner. Ali Javed came up to the table saying that it was very wrong that women from India were not fond of drinking. We tried ignoring him, then pointed out that India was a poor country and no woman could be a participant in burning up the finances of the household. To this he replied, I never drink with my own money; why shouldn't one have what is free. Then he went and stood behind the chair of one of the hosts and began to shake it so much from behind that she feeling that she might land into the water got up hurriedly and moved away.

The host came up to me and praised the delegation saying that it was good that in India people were still following Marxism while in Pakistan Sajjad Zaheer and his teachings have been forgotten. Nobody was willing to walk this difficult path and he himself had become so tied up with business that he has no time for politics. This was a short, round gentleman with a spherical, bald head. His face was smooth and shiny and his hands had thick carrot like fingers that had several rings on them. I joked that how could he wear so many rings in his fingers and he shyly explained that though he did not believe in these things his mother and wife feared so much for his life that they brought these rings from various sufi saints and he had to wear them to please both the women. Rahu, ketu, Shani might have been replaced by pirs, fakirs, but Islam has not been able to change the basic insecurity of the people. Poor, progressive, broadminded men, so tortured by women! I asked about this strong, dominating wife who forced him to do what he did not wish to and he told me that his wife wore the 'naqab' and could not attend such functions.

How strange! These people wish to have freedom to think and debate, they wish to have a democratically elected government, but wish to keep half of their population in the prison of Hijab and Naqab. Democratic freedom when they get it and I hope that they shall get it soon would it free the women too? Would women be satisfied with the crumbs of freedom donated by the men? If they are entitled to equal freedom why are they being denied participation in the struggle for gaining that freedom?

The menu of the dinner brought a smile to the lips of the vegetarians because it had several vegetarian dishes. In the last few days they had been subsisting on curd, salad and rice. Fed up with the food one day Chandrakant Devtale ji had asked me 'Tell me Noor had these people demanded Pakistan only to eat meat.' Everyone ate well that night and just as we were finishing Sabua arrived.

Sabua is one of those women in Karachi who participate in most of the literary and cultural programmes of the city and has made her house a centre for musical evenings. She herself sings well and promotes younger artistes. Two years before she had visited India and had written a travelogue in Urdu of the same name. It had become quite popular and had helped in removing a lot of misunderstandings and misgivings about India in the mind of the common people. Shueb her husband has been in the Air Force of Pakistan and he never gets permission to visit India though he applies every time the regime changes. He jokes about it and says, "For me the regime shall change only when I get permission to visit India."

His house is full of Indian handicrafts and in his garden is a Cheeku tree. Sindh is not its habitat and it has been nurtured with so much care that it now bears fruit which I sampled. Sabua had brought me and two other women in her car to her huge bungalow in Defense. She had arranged an evening of music at her place and wanted to give women a chance to freshen up. But our absence also gave the men a chance to drink themselves silly. When they arrived after half an hour Kamla Prasad ji immediately suggested that we should leave. But everyone especially Sabua and Raahat bhai insisted that we must stay for the music. Much to my regret later I also supported them and we stayed.

The hall had a floor arrangement with a slightly elevated dais for the singers. The first singer a young girl had just begun to sing when Irshad Ameen and Ali Javed began such a loud 'wah wahing' that the poor girl lost her nerve and the scale. These two were so proud of success in their first trial that they now plucked the marigold flowers decorating the dais and began showering the next singer with petals. When Devtale ji tried to stop them Ali Javed shouted 'koi Devtale ke muh par taala lagao' [somebody put a lock on Devtale's mouth]. Seeing such a senior poet of Hindi being insulted in such a way, anyone who had been intending to interfere immediately sat back quietly. These two now seemed to have a free rein and became so noisy that two singers refused to sing. The one who did was almost drowned in petals which these two began showering on the audience as well. Now the Pakistani men also seemed to become a bit uncomfortable. They were men who had helped their sisters and daughters nurture their talent and were happy that their women were not just dolled up housewives; they worked hard on their music and they were proud to be performing before the Indian delegation. They would never have imagined that their women would be subjected to such vulgar behavior. One of them was getting up when another held his arms forcing him to sit back. All of them had anger writ large on their faces. Our Deputy Leader was neither bothered about them nor about the hosts and was laughing loudly and uncouthly. Someone has said that to see the real face of a person one should see his behavior when drunk.

I do not know when she had come and settled down right behind me. She wasn't saying anything but her gaze was so piercing that I had to turn around and meet her eye. She was staring at me as a mother would a doctor with an injection in his hand for the baby. Then she shook her head and I heard a clear voice saying 'so this your great Indian culture and civilization. This is what you shall teach the generation next: how to keep quiet? Close their eyes when faced with the ugly; lower their head when faced with injustice and look the other way when faced with corruption. This is not the inheritance of Sajjad Zaheer. You are thinking they are drunk; you are even more intoxicated than them, addicted to forbearance. Their intoxication can no way beat yours. Your heart wants you to do so much but you just keep sitting twiddling your thumbs. You must be praised for your extreme patience.'

I was looking at the faces of the men whose wives had sung or were going to perform. Their expression told me I must act fast or else it just might be too late. I got up and sensing my destination Raahat bhai also for the first time tried to quieten them down. Ali Javed replied angrily "Why? Why should we keep quiet? Are we afraid of anyone?" then seeing me he questioned 'yes Noor so what is the matter?'

"Nothing is the matter. I only ask you both to shut up. At least have some respect for the man whose name and work has brought you to Pakistan.' For the moment he shut up but kept throwing angry

glances at me throughout the evening. An hour later Sabua gifted all of us copper bells and saw us to the gate. I heaved a sigh and sat back in Rahat bhai's car. She was there beside me and said in a serious voice "What you did was perhaps the only way but do not assume that this would be the end of the matter."

"How do you know?"

"I have been keeping an eye on humanity for so long."

I was looking out of the window and turned to look at her in surprise. The shadow that was visible to me did not seem to be that of an old person; as the form had cleared and the body had become visible it seemed agile and active, certainly not an aged body and now when I was seeing her clearly she seemed to be a very fit woman, mature and in command of her lithely, supple body. Rahat bhai laughed as I jerked and said 'Had a nightmare within a cat nap?' The young woman so close was nowhere visible now.

CHAPTER FOUR

The bus that was to leave early in the morning moved at about 2 in the afternoon. Few minutes before our departure Sufi sahib brought a beautiful black and silver doshala for me; a gift from the Mazdoor Kisan Communist Party. Knowing the financial strain on any struggling communist movement I tried to refuse the gift but he with half a smile opened it and wrapped it on my shoulders as if it had always been mine, I had forgotten it somewhere and he was simply returning it to me.

I was waiting for the form to come and sit down by me. Till it's being was vague and I thought it to be a figment of my imagination, the desire to be with it was also undefined but now that I knew that it was an individual I missed it the minute I was alone and each moment seemed like a long time without it. Several years before I had questioned Ammi on creativity and why it's stream suddenly runs dry and then after a long gap begins to flow again. She had replied that there was no hard and fast rule for creativity and no recipe like solitude, peace, calm etc. exist. These external stimuli act more like the restrictions imposed by society, governments and often the writer themselves. Creativity cannot be compelled. If it is sleeping it is difficult to awaken and if it arises then it is tough to wrap up and put aside. Was this shadow a creation of my own imagination? But if it was then it should be in my control. Why did it not obey me, come when I called, why did it have a will of its own?

Dusk was setting on the sandy plains of Sindh and the bus was racing on the highway. We had been on the highway for only about an hour when the driver's phone rang. The cleaner picked it up and said a sleepy, sing song 'Hellooo'. Sixteen or so, rather tall, thin framed boy, whose long shirt seemed like it had been washed and now hung on a hanger. He believed himself to be rather good looking and so had begun practicing mannerisms to attract; he had a slanting smile, a slanting glance, stood a bit slanting and walked with a slanted swing. He lay slanting on the seat beside the bonnet and then jumped up suddenly after saying 'hellooo' and stood absolutely straight. His face lost its colour, eyes enlarged, trembling hands and fear writ all over his face. Seeing his condition the driver slowed the bus and asked "what is it, you son of an ass!" The junior ass handed him the mobile without replying. The driver said

'hello' and jerk braked the bus to listen carefully. Zafar bhai who was accompanying us till Lahore went up to him and was informed that it was the Karachi Police Headquarters. One of their jeep was to escort us and they were angry that we had moved without informing them. We would now have to stop and wait for them. We were so proud of ourselves. Nowhere in India had we writers been so honored. A few got up to alight and received a curt order from the driver 'no one is to get down by order of the Commissioner Police.' We began to doubt our importance; perhaps this was not about an escort.

A jeep with an inspector and three constables arrived after about half an hour. The driver was scolded and then the inspector turned to Zafar bhai. When Zafar bhai said that escort is required only at night and that Larkana Police station had been informed to provide an escort, he was soundly reprimanded 'This is for us to decide who, when and what danger is there.' Was the Pakistan Government afraid of a handful of Indian writers? The inspector counted twenty three heads and got down.

My condition was like the weak character in a health tonic advertisement. For the first time in life I felt very powerful. We had not been able to bring about a revolution; so what if our party was not even aiming for a revolution. We could still be the reason of fear. I sat up erect in my seat. The jeep and bus began to move. A good highway lends its own speed and a clear, smooth road seems to egg on the foot to press the accelerator. The driver was borne away by the attraction of the road, first overtaking the jeep and then speeding away. Probably he logically believed that how would Indian writers alight from a bus running at 80 km/hr. We stopped after a couple of hours at a roadside teashop when the police jeep arrived and the inspector began scolding the man for moving so much ahead of the police jeep. The driver proudly replied "My bus can do more than 100 km/hr." "But our jeep can do no more than forty" the inspector replied snobbishly. Not to be outdone the driver questioned "So why don't you buy a bicycle Sir?" "We ride a cycle or a jeep, you have to follow us, so that we can keep an eye that no one gets down and runs away."

The whole arrangement was humiliating, and I felt like telling the fellow "Dear Inspector Brother, we have enough opportunities of committing suicide in our own country; our government and society is quite capable of providing the reason and there are many suitable places for this. We have no need to jump off a running bus." But a guest must maintain silence!

There is a Spanish saying that if one wishes to befriend a girl one should talk of her dog. I thought I would try this with the angry bus driver sipping tea from a big glass and grumbling away to himself. Placing a hand on the bus I said "Shah ji, your bus is beautifully painted. Did you get it decorated yourself?"

His anger seemed to vanish like an air bubble "Baji, I myself selected all the designs and flowers; interior and exterior both. I went to at least thirty decorators." He was stroking the bus lovingly "I was earlier only a driver. When I saved enough to buy my own bus I fulfilled all my desires. She is beautiful, isn't she?"

"Very beautiful! And how graceful is her gait. The way she glides on the highway is like a hot knife running through butter."

His face seemed unable to contain the grin that spread on it at this praise "It is indeed the educated who can use such language. How can the illiterate like us utter such sugar dipped words!"

"No, no Shah ji, you have the Ayats of the Holy Book written on the inside. But something written in Urdu on the bonnet is half erased and illegible."

"It is not for you, Baji!" He blushed to a bright pink. His cleaner had slantingly stepped up and said, "Shall I tell you Baji?"

"Shut up stupid one! Actually Baji, people sit on the bonnet which I do not like, so I got written "Sitting on the bonnet is strictly prohibited."

"But that is right, why did you not wish to tell it to me?"

"People were still not paying heed so-----."

"So he had printed 'see an ass is sitting here.' The cleaner tilted his head away from the slap aimed at him and ran away slanting. I was enjoying this conversation when the three policemen emerged after having eaten their fill. They counted us as we boarded the bus reminding me of school picnics. I think I should explain how the delegation of twenty four had been reduced to twenty three. One of us had come with us only to meet her friends and relatives. Arjumand Ara vanished on reaching Karachi and did not attend a single session. She did however call Rahat bhai once to inform him that she would stay a day longer in Karachi and that he should arrange for her to reach Lahore. Rahat bhai had bluntly told her that she should ask the people she was staying with to arrange for her journey. She however seemed quite unrepentant on meeting us in Lahore.

We were supposed to reach Jamshoro at seven in the evening but we arrived after nine. Jamshoro is the biggest and most beautiful University of Sindh. We were informed that more than three hundred people had been waiting for us for the last two hours. I was walking slowly, dragging my tired feet when at a distance, a white crown placed on a thin frame, more buried than seated on an arm chair became visible. Older, face lined with a score of years gone by, Comrade Mir Mohammad Talpur was sitting in the cold veranda, waiting for us. I knew that one should not behave in such a manner in Pakistan, aware that old people should not be given emotional shocks but I could not stop myself and ran to embrace him. He held me close with one arm saying lovingly "No no, do not weep; this is your home, why weep on reaching home!" He now walked with the help of a stick. When I introduced Veda and Rakesh to him he joked "Veda? From the four Vedas- Rig, Yajur, Atharva and Saam! Which one are you?' Then he became serious and said "the Vedas were written here in Sindh, now you people say it belongs to you."

Rakesh immediately countered "No no, how can the Vedas belong to just one country."

Comrade Talpur smiled, a serious, soft smile "When people are divided, civilizations also develop partitions, 'ours' turns into 'mine' and 'thine'; today our children do not believe that we are in anyway connected to the Vedas; so it is all right, you preserve them."

'It is difficult to shake hands with the hand that has wounded one. Real friendship between India and Pakistan shall develop only when the generation that had caused the injuries shall be dead and gone'. Amrit Rai, the legendary writer Premchand's son and a writer in his own right had once said to me in Allahabad. It is true that while the wound is raw it is impossible to judge which ones are deeper and hurt more because the pain of a wound can be known only to the heart that bleeds. But it is also true that friendship can happen only with the like-minded. If Com Talpur son rejects his past, then how can my daughter be friends with him? They shall then be acquaintances and not friends, treating each other with formality rather than comradeship.

We were welcomed by the President of the Student Union; and then a young teacher Dr. Amar Sindhu spoke; short haired, dressed in jeans and a loose kurta she could have been a young academician of any country. Over a light tea we discussed language politics and I informed them about the last long essay that Sajjad Zaheer wrote was in support of making Sindhi language one of the National language and that it came into being sometime after his death. A young comrade Jan Nisar, said that because of similarity of script, Urdu had begun to dominate Sindhi. Embarrassed I expressed my unhappiness over this fact but Comrade Talpur interrupted me and said, "Thankfully it is Urdu and not Punjabi or else we would long have lost our language, our culture and our civilization to Punjab."

Sitting in the bus cutting through the night I reflected why do we desire to make everyone like us? Everyone should think, believe, pray, condemn and appreciate like we do. Why are we so afraid of diversity, why do we want life to be flat? We cajole, persuade or force everyone to be like us; why wish to see our face reflected in every face?

"You are thinking of very basic things. If people would believe this why would they attack any other nation?"

"To extend one's kingdom is different and not respecting another culture and wishing to bring it to an end is entirely different."

"You think it is possible for an invader who would rule as he wills but not interfere in the beliefs, philosophy, ideology and freedom of expression of the subjects?"

I was weighing the pros and cons of her question and would have liked some time to reach my own conclusion on the acquisition of land and overpowering of culture. But her words were probing not just my brain but also my heart and soul.

"Take you for example. I met you at my will, with my own desire I cleared your vision so that you could see me, gave you the confidence to believe that I was not a schizophrenic vision and what is the result of all this effort? You now wish to compel me to appear, you now force your desires on me! Why?"

"That is because even though you are so close to me you do not tell me anything about yourself. You are playing hide and seek with me?"

“Am I? A shadow first that took a form then began speaking to you, tried to guide you so that you would see the other side of events and now is finally showing my full form to you. All this I have done on my own. I could have so easily continued to be a coloured blob.”

“Accepted that you came to me yourself, but the yearning to know more about you is mine; I had felt your presence as I had hugged Comrade Talpur, felt that you were pleased at the public display of my admiration and love for a senior comrade. You know me in and out, so I too have a right to know about you!”

“Then why doesn’t the victorious invader have a right to believe that they who were beaten back, who lost the war and were defeated were his property and he had every right to force his decisions on them. The intoxication of ‘right’ has seen every conqueror ruin old civilizations declaring them barbaric, undeveloped and uncultured. In its root is the fear of being discovered to be substandard; we wish to make everyone like us so our inferiority is not discovered.”

“But the majority does accept now that every country has a right to choose its own government.” I wished to keep the discussion focused on the present.

“Really! You believe there is no interference, because there is no physical attack? Aren’t you in India being assaulted with all kinds of attacks which have led to erosion in the civilization and a narrowing down of the definition of culture. Today world over the enemy is multi-headed and some of its heads appear in disguise. When progressive writers movement came into existence the enemy was one and very obvious; the challenge to any mass movement today is to tear off the disguises and masks of the enemy and confront it in its original form.”

Not knowing what to say I was silent. There were the many wars being fought all over the world and then there was the cultural onslaught. The enemy had been identified and we had raised slogans at the border: America ka jo yaar hai, is paar ya us paar hai, ghaddaar hai, ghaddaar hai! But no one seemed able to protect their land or safeguard their identity. The region that we had crossed was a backward, undeveloped area but even here, coca cola culture was very visible. The head condemned the physical wars like Iraq and Palestine but the heart exclaimed that it was this silent invader that would turn out to be the real killer.

“Not always.’ She had been silent for so long and I so involved in my thoughts that I gave a vague look of incomprehension. She repeated “Not always. Sometimes, what spread slowly turns out to be extremely beneficial.”

Larkana is a small township whose communist party unit is said to have been formed by Sajjad Zaheer himself before the freedom of India and Pakistan in 1944. I had yet to confirm this. In 1949 he was underground here and it was after two months of hidden existence that he had emerged with a long beard, dressed like a Pathan, the disguise he donned for a whole year. The Party and Progressive Writers unit of Larkana wanted to have a whole day seminar here but shortage of time had given us only a half an hour to exchange greetings with the unit.

The jeep escorting us had reached before us. Wherever we had stopped so far, the inspector and constables would get down reluctantly and stood by carelessly to keep an eye on us. A few times Devtale ji and Premchand Gandhi had tried to strike a friendship with them but they had been so cold shouldered that no one else thought of making any effort in this direction. But in Larkana they were in a completely different form. They opened the door of the bus themselves and greeted each passenger with a low bow and salaam. Saying "Welcome to Larkana Sir/Madam!" Walking with me to the gate Prof Vijay Singh said softly "I preferred their earlier attitude!"

Surprised and a bit awkward at the changed circumstance we were standing in a group when Dr. Muslim Shameem walked up to welcome us. Respected Professor, critic and communist, one who was always in the forefront of peace efforts with India, one of the first to raise his voice against the steep brotherly treatment of Bengali language and culture Muslim Shameem gestured to the gentleman accompanying him 'This is Ghulam Nabi Memon, Senior Superintendent Police'. We immediately understood the reason for the escorting policemen suddenly turning so polite. Strong body, medium height, baked brown skin, broad face, crowned with thick salt and pepper hair, a slightly long Sindhi nose, under which were curled, waxed mustaches, distinct lips that smiled a bit satirically and sharp, attractive eyes. He was dressed in an off-white Salwar shirt with a cartridge belt on his waist and cross belt on his chest that had a revolver at the end. He clicked his heels but instead of saluting placed his hand on his chest.

I extended my hand and said, "There must have been an increase in crime amongst women ever since you took over as Larkana Police Chief."

"Why so, Apa jaan." He asked a bit surprised.

"Well any woman would like to be arrested by such a good looking man." People around burst out laughing. He blushed and turned purple, clearly men in Pakistan are not used to receiving compliments on their looks; but recovering quickly he said, "We are now getting on in years, but we were something to reckon with in our youth."

Muslim Shameem cut him off "Talk of yourself. I am still young." Saying this he took off his cap and stroked his bald head. This was Larkana, a small town like anywhere in the world where love flourishes, friendships blossom, relationships are formed without the formalities of introductions and society is stable and secure. Time is not just spent here, it is lived. I have often regretted the fact that no picture of mine was taken with the SSP Larkana.

The same things were said in Larkana as elsewhere. The difference was that most of the speakers were young men. I had been told that the left was alive and working in interior Sindh and has a commendable mass front amongst the youth. The entire function was recorded by a local channel that later interviewed both me and Kamla Prasad ji. The fearless manner in which the interviewer, a young journalist named Nisar Khokhar asked questions was a bit surprising. True private channels seem to have opened up the society and are bringing a lot of information to the masses that was earlier kept a secret but an open discussion on the importance of Marx and the manner in which it can influence the masses of South Asia is something unimaginable in a military dictatorship.

It took much longer than half an hour in Larkana and the driver began to grumble. Driving at forty and then stopping at every other place for discussion, tea, speeches and slogans; what the hell was going on? He was quite fed up. When he saw that his grumbling was not having any effect on either the hosts or the guests he threatened to drive away without the delegation. At this one of the body guards accompanying the IG stepped up and said, "move that bus an inch you ass and we shall confiscate not only the bus but also your license. Let us begin with the license." The bus driver was almost in tears and begged for mercy; all of us also became nervous and ran towards the bus. As the bus coughed and began to move some of us noticed that Premchand Gandhi was missing. The resulting commotion had the SSP shed his garb of a polite host and turn into the highest police officer of the region that he was; while the constables of the escort jeep looked at each other as if saying "Hadn't we said so before that some would just take advantage and vanish. See now!"

Thankfully, Premchand Gandhi was sighted sauntering at the turn of the road, conversing earnestly with two Sindhi young men. They ran as they saw us calling and gesticulating and climbed up apologizing profusely. I was a bit upset with the young men of the delegation; none of them had stood by me in the musical evening's show down with Ali Javed. So now I took this one to task "Accepting that you are named after two very well-known people but just counting on that you decided to take a walk of the town?"

"Thing is Noor Baji-----."

"What was it? Were you not aware that this is an unknown land, the language and culture is alien, we do not know the rituals, traditions and manners and you just walk away with anyone?"

"Noor Baji, I have to hunt a cyber café everywhere we stop."

"Why? What is the urgency to keep checking your mail or is it your bank balance that you have to keep an eye on?"

Premchand gestured me to sit on the window seat and then sat down by me "Baji I have a great yearning to know Pakistan and clear my heart of the misunderstandings existing within me about this land. My problem is that I want others in India to see Pakistan from my eyes and understand the love and affection of the Pakistani people for Indians."

My anger vanished as I shamefacedly mumbled "That is a good decision but-----."

"Isn't it? So, I have to keep hunting for a cyber café" sensing my confusion he brought out a piece of paper from his pocket "I am writing for the 'Rajasthan Patrika' and it is being published every day." He handed me the paper from which, even in the growing dark the headline "Indian Writers delegation in Pakistan" scorched my guilty eyes. I was so ashamed of myself that I wished the earth would part and swallow me.

She was looking at me from the window of the moving bus with eyes that held anger and complaint. But how was she moving with the bus? Where was she standing? What if she was to slip and come under the wheel?

“That is all that you worry about! Getting hurt, being insulted or neglected. Have you any idea how much you have hurt a comrade. This is not the wound that is physical; it is one that would keep smarting for a long while. He has so much respect for you; why could you not ask where he had gone. You are walking the same road but with different missions. You only wish to gather impressions, experiences while he wishes to share, to give; how walls can be broken, friendships formed, and misgivings wiped away. He does not wish to capture the love he is sharing, he wishes to give it wings.”

Her words were like an icy shower on a cold night. Embarrassed I turned towards Premchand “Do forgive me brother, I have wronged you!” “No, no Baji, please do not apologize” and then proceeded to tell me what else he was planning to write and where it would be published. I turned to her who was still glowering at me and said “See! It was not a big thing at all. I was forgiven in a moment and you were making me feel so guilty.”

She smiled, I felt some relief but then she said “Forgiveness does not end the crime. It ends only when there is a surety of it never being repeated.” As usual the words came through the air for she had vanished. I was involved in taking in the town. How I would have loved to stroll these streets, enter any small eatery and talk to the people dining about the worthy dishes to be sampled, ask around for a place to stay and not finding one spend the night on a park bench under the stars that visited this settlement every night. Would it ever happen that I back pack in Pakistan?

CHAPTER FIVE

I was dozing off when I felt someone was pressing the joints of my fingers. Recently, perhaps due to excessive and quite useless typing these joints ache. Maybe it is the beginning of arthritis or maybe having spent a practically menial work free life my bones were too delicate. The massage was so welcome that I moaned in gratitude.

She giggled. “This is not to give you comfort silly, it is to waken you up. Don’t you wish to look around? In the surroundings lay the introduction to the inner nucleus”

“Can’t I have both-comfort and information?” I asked loathe to give up the massage. She pushed my hand away “Do you know where we are headed now?”

“Yes. To Sehwan, the shrine of Lal Shahbaaz Qalandar.”

“Yes, some scholars think that the Sufism did not have its origin in Iran. It was born here in Sindh and spread to India on one side and Iran on the other. Sufis handled humanity with a delicate touch, felt the hearts of the common masses and wiping away the harsh scratches of fundamentalism from the mirror of life drew delicate lines of many hues. They discovered ways and means to enhance and adorn culture not distort or destroy it. That is why everyone comes here and finds solace irrespective of their religion. Civilization accepts their debt because they applied balm on the wounds given by the rulers. They belonged to the people, so people have kept them alive.”

We were quiet. The night darkened and then a cool moonlight spread over the dark. It was probably the 8th or 9th of the Lunar Calendar. Some mounds became visible in the silvery light. "What is that?"

"That is now called 'graves.'

"Graves! Such high ones! I never heard that Sindh had any tradition of building Pyramids."

She laughed mirthlessly "Why can't you ever think beyond the known. These are mounds under which the Harappan Civilization is buried."

"What! Is that Mohenjo Daro?" I turned so enthusiastically towards the window that my head banged against it. She smiled mischievously "Many historians and archeologists have been banging their heads like this to understand this great civilization. You shall reach Mohenjo Daro tomorrow. This is the surrounding region of Sehwan. You can see the Indus from here. Tomorrow you must wake up early and see it; and also prepare yourself for what is to come."

"I know what you hinting at; the fact that I was not allowed to speak today at Jamshoro."

"This is the beginning. Such incidents shall increase and slowly you shall become an outsider."

"But Kamla Prasad ji was saying again and again that Noor should speak."

"He is a good man, but he won't be able to change anything."

"Let that be. Tell me about these mounds. Do you know the secrets hidden underneath them?"

She was quiet for a while then said "Sometimes a wind blows that forces the cover of dust and mud to shift. Then some, a very few are fortunate enough to see the face of 'life.' The one who does see it becomes a 'paardarshi' one who can see beyond the screen of time. Change is possible through the one who has seen this, who can then see the future and decide the road of the present, divert the stream of thought and becomes a 'Qalandar'.

"Shall I see the face of life?"

"I cannot say. I am not sure if you are to be trusted."

Leaving the broad main vein of the town the bus entered a narrow alley. The road was dark as most small-town roads are in the middle of the night, the settlement was asleep. But as we reached the end of the alley we were greeted by lights and noise, the lanes were crowded, shops were open and glittering with winking coloured bulbs and from afar floated the notes of a Samma a group singing akin to Qawwali. We had reached the shrine of Shahbaaz Qalandar. I was sitting in the front seat and was amongst the first to alight. I waited for Kamla Prasad ji. He was right at the back and when he got down his face which was usually calm and satisfied had now a lost, somewhat 'not quite here' expression. He seemed to have forgotten that we are a part of a delegation and would have walked straight up the steps had not the senior Sajjada Nasheen stopped him.

"Why? Why can't we go up?" he inquired impatiently

“Comrade, we must stop for rest of the delegation.”

“Why?” He asked in desperation.

“There is a welcome arranged for us; look!” I pointed to the drums and shehnai that struck up a Naubat to welcome us.

The chief Sajjada Nasheen was telling us “Lal Shahbaaz is a qalandar. In the whole world there are known to be only two and a half qalandar and Lal Shahbaaz was one.” I was most curious to know about the one who was considered half. How had he been judged to be incomplete or lesser of the three? On the other hand the whole of Sindh is like the land of the Sufis and peers, just as Himachal Pradesh is the land of the devatas. Hearing about the two and a half qalandar reminded me of an incident my mother would narrate. Once Mir Taqi Mir, the great Urdu poet was asked about the number of contemporary poets in Urdu and he replied, ‘Just one and a half, one being me and the half being Sauda.’ The person had objected saying that there was Mir Soz as well, who had a poetry anthology to his credit. Mir Taqi Mir had conceded saying ‘Alright then there are one and three quarters!’

Today when a saint, baba, peer or godman can be found in every nook and corner it is pertinent to stop and think about the ones accepted as ‘qalandars’ by the people. But who am I to question; I remain loyal to Kabeer as he sings ‘na kahu se dosti, na kahu se bair.’ ‘friendship with no one and to no one bear enmity.’ I performed the ritual circle of the grave and as we stood in a group the Sajjada Nasheen asked us to make a wish and Kamla Prasad ji, in his loud voice spoke for all of us ‘We wish for permanent peace and friendship between India and Pakistan.” There was silence for a minute after he had said this and there echoed from every corner of the great mausoleum ‘Ameen.’

Was it my delusion or my heart’s desire or had those sitting in corners, shivering in the cold, curled up inside blankets had really repeated and echoed our wish? They who had come to find a solution to their problems to the shrine of Mast Qalandar, who had no close friend or relative in India, who had nothing to gain from peace and friendship, yet they had raised their hand to pray for peace because they knew that governments may fall, rulers overthrown, orders turned to dust but what shall not change, one who is permanent is the common man; the everlasting, the ever green, the immortal, the truth and it is they who desire peace, the right to live, because they are the ones who belong, who own this planet.

We were given ‘tabarruk’ which had flowers and sugar coated nuts and also some raw dates that grow around the shrine. These dates are never plucked, they drop themselves and when pilgrims increase in number as they do during the Urs, the fruits also increase so that each pilgrim gets at least one date. I was walking towards the broad courtyard before the Mazar when someone draped a green velvet cloth over my shoulders. It was G.M. Sahib.

G.M Sahib is one of the innumerable sajjadansheen of this shrine. Though the sufi Islamic way of life had been indoctrinated in him he read Marx during his college days and turned a communist. He then chose Sajjad Zaheer and Comrade Sibte Hasan as his murshed, worked underground, was arrested , spent a few years in jail was released and became a businessman. His name is Ghulam Muhammad which does not match his left ideology, so he calls himself GM which in his business world can be General Manager.

He does not take a penny from the offerings at the Durgah, his business has its ups and downs, he still calls himself a leftist, his wife and daughter do not wear a hijab, his every other sentence does not end with Inshallah or Mashallah and he can be found at the Dargah on every Urs. He is an example of the usual confused, but good, loving, peaceful South Asian.

I glanced a bit awkwardly at other members of the delegation at the expensive gift but all of them were dancing to the drumming in the courtyard; yes even 75 year old Kamla Prasad ji. Today the Qalandar must have been really pleased to see so many Hindus and Muslims dancing merrily at the steps of his grave. He, whose poetry had been sorted out for any influence of Raidas and Kabeer, whose couplets that acclaimed the unity of god and proclaimed Ram and Raheem to be one and the same, was he pleased that a few writers, who saw humanity as a whole and not divided into races, religions, colour or castes who wished to bring equality to this world though not through religion were happy just to be here?

Quenched! That is what I felt; like a long draw of cool, sweet water coursing down my throat. But no thirst is ever quenched; it only changes its form. Those who desired a separate country, were they fulfilled on getting a separate state? Did they not try to change face, colour and fragrance of politics, history, arts and music? People say that Bade Ghulam Ali Khan had decided to live in Pakistan and had been welcomed by ardent fans. In the first performance Khan Sahib was exploring the octave of Raag Bilawal, everyone was drunk with the wafting notes, when a 'chhota khayal' composition began with the words : Kanha kahe karat barjori! One in the audience got up and said that this was an Islamic country and songs about Hindu Gods should not be sung here. Khan sahib not only stopped singing he rounded up his barely set household and came back to India.

I remembered the letter of Fauziya had written to me twenty five years ago. Fauziya, my childhood friend, who had come from Lucknow to Pakistan after marriage. "I miss Lucknow all the time, but especially so in Phagun [Spring]. How can one welcome the spring without the songs of Radha and Krishna teasing and playing with each other?" This question is not the only one. There so many more: Can one change the name of a Raga and expect its beauty to remain untouched? If beauty is changed would the soul remain untouched? And if the face and soul both are modified how much of the original Raga be left? What would be the life of the distorted Raga and what replace that which is lost?

"You want answers for the questions that have been asked by civilization time and again and has never been satisfied with the answers."

"I am not asking for the answers, I am only carefully categorizing and putting them away so that when the time comes I can demand their answers."

"From whom?"

"Myself!"

She was standing behind me, now she came and stood before me then almost to herself she said "You are right. One has to look for all the answers within."

"You seem to belong to the 'aham brahma asmi' school of thought." [I am the creator]

"All of us belong there, or else we would still have been living in the caves. Our will to challenge nature and be god is what has brought us so far."

'I do not know how far I have reached. I find the smaller shrines surrounding the main Mazaar far more interesting, because I find they help me know the bigger shrine. I cannot imagine Nizamuddin Auliyas shrine without the mazaars of Amir Khusro, Jahan Ara and Mirza Ghalib. But there is no time for going round this place" I looked longingly at the nearby grave where two shadows had appeared and placed a solitary oil lamp.

'Let me tell you a story." While a shadow, she had not been very communicative. But now that she had a form and that too of a woman's she was being loyal to her gender; talking so much and now was going to tell me story. What else could I ask for? "There was once a Peer, respected and revered around"

"What was his name?"

"Shhh! It is forbidden to utter his name."

"But these restrictions do not exist for you"

"There are restrictions for everyone; the difference is whether one obeys them or not"

"Do you?"

"No! But I wish to tell you the story as it should be narrated. Tell me if you wish to hear or else---."

"No no, tell me----please" I was afraid she was about to vanish.

"Peer sahib had innumerable devotees, the rich, the poor, the needy and the sick. Everyday a lot of fruit, money, cloth and incense was offered. Peer was moody and often lost in his own meditation. One day the richest landlord in the area appeared with a tray full of gold. Peer came out of his thoughts, saw the gold and aimed such a kick that sent the gold coins flying in all directions. The second kick he aimed at the landlord's head bent at his feet in reverence. "Leave the hypocrisy" boomed the Peer, "tell me why have you come?" The man flat on his back folded his trembling hands and stuttered "God has given me everything except a son!"

The Peer jumped and landed on his chest, then holding his fashionably pointed beard said "God has given or you have stolen and grabbed with both hands! Evil one! Your father, grandfather and great grandfather have wrecked havoc on this land! Now with your son, you wish to continue the torture and oppression of the poor people. After you they shall have some relief from your filthy blood. Get out of my sight!"

Milegi nahi mujhse tujhe koi saughat

Rahega tu aur tera khandan be aulad

No gift from me shall you get

No son shall you ever beget!

The landlord might have borne the grief of childlessness; but such humiliation before the people who lived on his leftovers! How could he bear it? He began keeping information and came to know of a boy who at the age of seven knew the Holy Quran by heart. Seven years was reduced to birth and soon the news was spread that a child was born reciting the Ayats from the Holy Book. Soon stories of miracles began to spread: he waved his hand and brought a diamond ring from the air, looked at a face and knew its heart's desire, his touch would drive away high fever, his talisman cure insanity. When his fame had spread a bit, the landlord donated a large piece of land and built the child peer's Takia.

The senior peer began to lose his devotees, the offerings reduced, gatherings and congregations became lack-lustre. One day one of the followers found him on his bed, with a huge knife struck through his chest. He was almost gone and in his last breath said 'everything shall overturn.!' And his open hand overturned. His fame and following was almost gone and it was a quiet burial. The big Takia continued to be built but then a strange thing began to happen: whatever would be built during the day would be swallowed up by the earth during the night. Slowly the whole township began to get buried. Now the citizens woke up to the injustice that had been done to the elder Peer. The younger one also came and prayed and established contact with his soul which forgave him and asked only to be left alone. The town stopped going underground and the huge Takia was also successfully built. Those bricks that you see peeping under the soil are the remains of the town that got buried.

She was quiet but in her eyes danced a mysterious mischief.

"Interesting story, but has no head or tail"

"It is a well-known story, how can it be without head or tail?" a mischievous astonishment twinkled in her eyes.

"First of all, this Peer happened in the 16th century and this covered architecture belongs to the Harappan civilization. Then how could some Peer have buried them through a miracle. I do understand some history you know." Her face showed as if some inner knot had been untangled. Looking at me calmly she said: why? Isn't Taj Mahal being propagated as some Hindu queen's palace, in another version Qutub Minar had been built by Prithviraj Chauhan, so that his wife Sanjukta could have a glimpse of the river Jamuna after her Puja. How many Hindu temples were broken to build mosques, how many Buddhist Monasteries crushed to build Hindu temples, how many tribal gods were Aryanized? And why only buildings, how do we know that the Vedas had been originally written in Sanskrit? Did the highly developed Indus Valley Civilization really not have a god? If not then it must have been a great civilization that had complete confidence in itself. To introduce a god in such a civilization is also a sacrilege, an act of terror."

She was right, but it was only one side of the picture. I had seen around me innumerable proofs of the other side. Thousands of Hindus constructed the Tazia, played the drums to announce the Tazia

procession, stood on the footpath to give water and sherbet to those walking barefoot in the procession to bury the Tazia in the Karbala and made their children cross under the Tazia to have a long life. Thousands of Muslims created the kites that crowded over the Makar Sankranti sky and designed attractive Rakhis which sisters would tie to the wrist of their brothers. Could this be considered interference in culture?

I was still sorting this out when she shook her head “How can you equate war and love. Holding each other’s hand in the struggle for life can never be counted as forced oppression. The ones in your thoughts are the ones who help create the Ganga Jamuni Tehzeeb, the civilization that is India, the culture that was understood by the Sufis and they tried to spread it all over the world.”

“But it is that culture which is under attack. Who remembers the message of the Sufis; everyone wishes to get more fundamentalist than their grandfather. Yes, a lot of effort to spread the message of peace and love but did it ever win?”

“Did Marxism and Communism win and survive? There is no end to making life beautiful- there is no finale about it. There is no question of victory or defeat because this is a continuous struggle. Many have been the wars fought on this road, several won, more lost. But the struggle continues and remember ‘struggle launched is victory won’, because every struggle is a harbinger of hope!”

CHAPTER SIX

Leaving behind the shrine and the Takia the bus was moving towards the place where we were to spend the night. Most of us were silent, some were humming the notes of the just heard music.

The bus lurched as it began to climb up a hillock, the settlement had been left below. To be higher than the common people, the colonizers had built most of their Circuit Houses and Dak Bungalows on small hills. There were no hills around only a solitary hillock that had the circuit house on top of it.

Tall, handsome, big turbaned Pathans welcomed us. Large limbed, broad frames, dressed in baggy pleated salwars and rounded shirts; with shy smiles they stood with folded hands as if the British rulers had just left them. In my ears Tripta Wahi mumbled “Have we gone back a century?”

Tripta Wahi and Vijay Singh! Professors of Delhi University, experts of History, such firm leftists that one could feel the hammer and sickle floating somewhere near them all the time. Quick witted, sharp eyed and nimble footed Tripta and bemused eyes, lost gait and engrossed in his thoughts Vijay bhai. Whenever I would see them together they reminded me of a nursery rhyme taught in the first playschool I attended of the love between an owl and a pussycat:

The Owl and the Pussycat went to sea

In a beautiful pea-green boat,

The Owl looked up to the sky,

And sang to a small guitar,

'O Pussy my love,

What a beautiful Pussy you are'

Pussy said to the Owl 'You elegant fowl'

How charmingly sweet you sing'

I knew Vijay bhai a bit from Delhi, but became good friends with Tripta on the bus journey from Delhi to Lahore. Vijay bhai publishes a journal :Revolutionary Democracy.", he is a Sikh but has trimmed his hair though beard and mustaches are in place. Tripta is a great converser, cracks jokes in English, Punjabi and Hindi, does not hesitate to object to what is wrong and is not afraid to support what is right. Vijay Bhai fits the conventional definition of a professor; tousled hair, ill- fitting clothes, tangled, salt and pepper beard and mustaches, eyes behind thick glasses that glint with recognition when the poor being having failed to get himself recognized has given up and moved away. Jokes by Tripta and others either go over his head or are understood after about ten minutes when he can be seen laughing alone. He can be found at the left of the left, that is ultra-left.

There were only two rooms in the circuit house with a large dining room in the centre, that had a huge table to seat twenty four and beautifully carved legs. Chairs arranged by the wall were also delicately adorned. The imperial rulers had left but South Asia still carries the symbols of their opulence. Probably the caretakers were not used to a visit by such a large group. Wives joined the husbands and chapatis were prepared on two tavas and thin rosy cheeked children ran from kitchen to the table carrying hot chapatis. Freedom had created two countries but what had changed for the masses? Perhaps just this much that earlier the dark skinned served the white skinner now the dark skinnners serve the dark skinnners.

Ordinary food, a meat dish and a vegetable but prepared with love and care. The smaller room was given to women and men rolled out mattresses and blankets on the floor, on the dining table and the kitchen. Feeling the need for another blanket Tripta went out and returned almost immediately, worry writ large on her face. She did not answer my question immediately but then could contain herself no longer and said, "I overheard the conversation going on in the back room. One voice was saying 'Bloody Hindus had left this place for ever. Have they returned to take back their land and property?" On this another voice answered, "If that is the case, we would bury them alive!"

I got up to explain our visit to the caretakers. Neither were all of us Hindus, nor had we come here to stay but Tripta held my hand and stopped me. I accepted her contention that explaining our eve-dropping might upset them. But I drew both the bolts. The other three were asleep and we shared a blanket and lay down on the bed. Till late we talked in muffled tones how much do fear, apprehensions, misgivings and word of mouth influence the decision that one takes; and how can one be sure of having taken the right decision in the presence of all these?

Despite the traditional alarum of banging one's head on the pillow as many times as the hour one wished to be awake I overslept. Someone was tickling my feet and she giggled as I squealed. White teeth shining on a dark brown face like a lightening rushing through dark grey clouds. Then she got up and in a commanding manner asked, "You wish to leave without seeing the sunrise over the river Indus?" I jumped up and ran to the bathroom. I had seen someone else also strike the pose in which she was standing; someone very close to me. Anyways, I would try to recall her resemblance some other time I decided and began to splash cold water on my face to jerk wake myself. One of the advantages of having a Muslim birth is that one can get dressed without having a bath. Poor Hindus would think ten times before taking such a decision and would keep sighing and lamenting that they were not able to have a bath, so were feeling lethargic or unwell etc. etc.

Five minutes and I was ready, she walked ahead leading me outside the circuit house. Her gait had a strange manner as if she was trying to make me recollect something; a memory that is like the shadow of a child, so close but jumping away every time the child wants to step on it. The shadow neither leaves the child nor allows itself to be caught. I pushed the effort to dig out familiarity and hurried behind her to reach the hilltop. A milky light was visible in the East, but it was still dark. Standing on the peak she raised a hand and as if nature had been waiting for the sign, the horizon turned pink and within minutes it deepened to a red with golden orange spread across the sky. In the dew laden dawn, at a short distance from where we stood flowed the broad, curving River. Sindhu, beyond which on the eastern banks resided the Hindus; holding it like a magical guiding thread traders from Arabia and Egypt came here to buy muslin, silk and spices and as a bonus received priceless gems of mathematics, philosophy and culture; crossing this river arrived the invaders and with them also came travelers like Al Baruni and Ibn-e-Batuta who opened up before the world the picture of this lands generosity, peaceful co-existence and humanity. This river must have been crossed by the Aryan nomads, and bathing in this river their wandering urges were calmed and for the first time they thought of settling down. Babur, escaping his step brothers found a new kingdom across it and his son Humayun swam this river to escape Sher Shah Suri and reach Iran and then with an army of five thousand Irani soldiers won back the kingdom. How much had happened on its banks and around it. Was that why it was drying up- fatigued and exhausted by history? What would be left if it was allowed to die? A few centuries of memory and then? It would figure in the stories and folklore, on the basis of which coming generations shall try to hunt out its source, its route and its delta, just as we are doing with the River Saraswati.

A strange loneliness was engulfing me. If a river that had been witness to so much, had given so much could die then Death and only Death was the sole truth. Life was but a mirage, a bubble, a line written on sand that does not last more than a moment or two. I was getting angry with this woman; why was she pushing me into this confusion? I had always considered life as being most important and Death something insignificant. Why was she leading me on with perplexing questions and baffling counter-questions? To what end? Did she wish to confuse me or want me frustrated and depressed? What right did she have to do so?

"Right is never given, it has to be taken." It was man's voice. Vijay bhai and Tripta were also walking up to see the sunrise over Indus. Had she brought them here? They were talking about last night and trying

to give the situation of the caretakers, the poor settlement a Marxist analysis. Vijay bhai gestured to me and Tripta to stand for a photograph.

“Take a picture that shows the Indus. Who knows if we shall ever come back here” instructed Tripta.

“Who know if we ever visit Pakistan again.” Smiled Vijay bhai

“It is possible that you might come to Pakistan and also come here, but who knows if you shall find Indus here.” She had her say and turned back, walking down the steep bank with her rhythmic, swinging gait.

CHAPTER SIX

I burst out laughing “You do like a joke Sadiq Sahib.”

“I am not joking!” He replied in all seriousness.

“You must be; how does one make a stopover at Mohenjo Daro for twenty minutes?”

“That is what I said, but Ali Javed insists that we have no more time to spare and nobody else is objecting.”

“Not even Vijay Bhai and Tripta Wahi, they are historians?”

“Of Medieval India. They would much rather see the fort of Lahore than a Harappan site.”

So many compartments. And people stick so religiously to them as if they would disintegrate if they emerged from them and explored a bit. I walked purposefully to Ali Javed and Kamla Prasad ji expecting a show down almost ran to accompany me. Ali Javed heard me out and then said “It is impossible, we shall have to pay one day extra for the bus.” “We could have spent less time at Sehwan; anyways who is interested in a Sufi Mazar.” I argued. An oblique smile seemed to say, ‘Everyone was interested but you and I have to take care of everyone’s sentiments.’ Aloud he said “Twenty minutes is all that the driver is willing to spare.” How I cursed myself for not taking the number of SSP of Larkana. But maybe he too would not have been willing to help; Ali Javed was the Deputy Leader of the delegation while I was a nobody. Seeing the sense of loss on my face and perhaps understanding that I was angry with the entire group who seemed to be getting a kick out of the quarrel between the Dy. Leader and the daughter of the man whose centenary was being celebrated, Kamla Prasad ji walked with me to the bus, “Actually there isn’t much to see at the site, most excavations have been moved away to museums. Twenty minutes should be enough and we can extend it by five or ten more minutes.” I refused to answer him, got into the bus and waited. An hour later we were at the gate of Mohenjo Daro, the first excavated site of the Great Indus Valley Civilization. Everyone began to hurry down, giving me curious glances as I refused to budge. “Hurry Noor, we have just twenty minutes.” Khagendra ji asked with concern. “You go ahead Khagendra ji, I do not wish to see Mohenjo Daro like this.” I saw Ali Javed raising an eyebrow towards Sarvat Khan as if to say, ‘spoilt brat isn’t she?’ I stayed put and waited to be alone to have a good cry. I would much rather not have gone to Sehwan and come here. I vowed I shall never be part of

a delegation again. Tears did not come; perhaps they could not decide what form to take- tears of anger or tears of loss.

She put an arm round me and 'loss' conquered 'anger' as I buried my face in her shoulder and wept. She let me cry for a full minute before saying "I am glad you did not take the few minutes. It is good to keep longing for something rather than fool yourself that you quenched your thirst with a half-hearted visit. But calm down and we'll take a stroll in the garden and the inner courtyard."

"I don't want to; I never wish to come here again." I answered petulantly.

"Oh! shut up! There are things the others will not, cannot see. I shall show them to you."

"Really!" I quickly wiped my face and got up.

"Greedy woman!" she laughed and patted my back. Together we walked the hedged lane and she pointed out a small boat "A replica of those times."

"Such a small one. How could they possibly cross the ocean in that?" I asked in awe.

"Crossing depends not on the strength and size of the ship rather on the will of the people to conquer the ocean. They were perhaps people who treated land as an extension of themselves and sea as an extension of the land. Nothing disconnected, nothing isolated."

"But so many must have perished in the high seas."

"And so many found new lands. Dear woman it is not making it or perishing, it is the will to try out the unknown that makes every life an adventure, people do it in travel, in relationships, in writing, in eating. By the way would you like to eat something grown here?" She asked pointing to a little boy selling guava and jharberies. "The best guavas in Pakistan are grown here she informed as I hunted out the ten rupee note from my purse and handed them to the progeny of the ancient civilization. He in turn hunted for the two rupees that he should pay me back. I waved it away and he gave me a smile to kill. Had his forefathers five thousand years back smiled like this at the Aryans not understanding that they were being invaded, that they were being vanquished?"

"Ugh! Dwell over your 'ifs' and 'buts' later. Have another guava."

"I have already had two." I protested.

"Actually you have had four, but I am not counting." Both of us burst out laughing. Sarvat climbing into the bus exclaimed "You should have come Baji, we had such fun..." Then she saw me laughing alone and muttered, "I'll sit a little behind" and hurried away. She gave me a broad wink and vanished as I promised myself that I would be back here, stay a night at the guest house and spend a whole day at this site. It would happen and yes soon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was noon when I glanced left and saw the board on the beautiful highway with a large arrow pointing 'Islamabad'. I glanced down the road that led to the capital of Pakistan. I had no desire to see this city. Every country has such modern, well ordered cities with similar buildings, straight parallel roads and blank faced, dry malls. Lahore which was our destination was a centre of culture and knowledge. Yes, I would have liked to meet Ahmed Faraz; his poetry had been a part of my growing up. Well, maybe some other time.

The bus was passing through what is fondly known as 'Thandi Sarak' or 'cool street' A canal drawn from the Ravi river, running through the Mall Road, with huge, shady trees on both sides because of which the temperature here is always a couple of degrees lower than rest of Lahore. Hence this name. There are huge bungalows, institutes and parks on both sides; the broad pavements have fruit sellers, their goods cut in a variety of shapes, set on inclined boards for better display. A glance on this road and one is introduced to the people living here: Lahoris: large hearted, fond of good food and drinks, appreciators of fine clothes and in love with junket excursions. Lahore! Rebuilt by Akbar, civilized by Anarkali and Noor Jahan, lived by Faiz and Manto and eternalized by Bhagat Singh. The Paris of the East!

Zaman Khan of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan was standing outside the building of HRCP to welcome the delegation. HRCP is continuously fighting for the rights of children and women; but perhaps its most important struggle is its battle against the oppression of the minorities. Progressive, liberal Muslims are his sympathizers and fundamentalists would like to see him behind the bars. Books published by this organization recount such tales and provide such data that the state can only look down in shame, posters elaborate scenes that tremble the soul. If one was to see only these one would imagine a strong, tall, large man with a loud voice who would be willing to challenge the government on all fronts. Zaman bhai, is a short, slim framed man. The roughness of Punjabi when it passes his tongue gets a sweet and soft texture. He likes to talk in questions which he poses with his nose pinched and eyebrows raised slanting in inquiry. He likes to jog and exercise in the mornings. I came to know this when I woke up next morning. We were to stay here.

Tea was served. Born in Lucknow and brought up by writers, then married to a Bengali has made me slightly fussy about tea. Pakistan had not provided us good tea at any place. On our way here, a street café owner became so nervous on seeing so many Indians together that he boiled water in a kerosene can. The tea served in Pakistan has everything but somehow tastes like the tea Ammi fooled us with, lacing it with joshanda to treat our cold. But here the tea was excellent and the caretaker a fine, smiling Punjabi. Another good thing that happened as we reached Lahore was people wearing the Kabuli or Afghan cap. A person wearing this cap seems a cross between Che Guevara and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan [Bachcha Khan or Frontier Gandhi]. Unfortunately the Taliban barbarians also wear this cap; thankfully they also have a checked scarf thrown over their shoulders for differentiation. Had I had my way, I would have banned this cap for them.

Tomorrow we had to participate in the Sajjad Zaheer Centenary Seminar. There was just this evening for us to meet, go around and shop. I was thinking where to begin when Taimur Rahman came and stood before me. Trade Union leader, professor of political science, singer and exceptional guitarist, Taimur, who like me belonged to a family of leftists.

"I have come to take you comrade. Come, a group of workers of different trade unions is waiting for you."

"But Taimur, I have to do a lot of things in Lahore, time is less and the demands of the heart many!"

"All that shall be seen to comrade. One of us shall accompany you; let us first go to the meeting."

It was not a big hall, chairs were old and ordinary, but it was full, with several people standing. We began talking without formalities: shall Marxism survive in these times? Are Indian workers facing the same problems as us? How would privatization and globalization affect our fundamental rights? Two countries, with same concerns, same problems and similar struggles! Would the solution not be the same?

After the meeting a senior comrade of about sixty accompanied me. The young comrades walked away in a group with Taimur. I remarked "These boys seem to be partying tonight."

Comrade Mateen smiled and said "Of course. It is Taimur's 'Rukhsati' today."

"Taimur is to formally bring his wife home today? But he has been looking after us since morning." I asked in surprise.

"It is party's work and has to be done. This work is over, that one too would be managed. Come I'll show you the room where your father had formed the first Railway Workers Union of Pakistan"

It was an ordinary room, with a square table in the centre that had dark stains of tea and ink. A dozen or so chairs, on the wall opposite the door in red was inscribed in Urdu 'Railway Mazdoor Union-Lahore.'

"Is it used even----."

"Now? Of course. We shall not leave this room under any circumstances; this is a historical place for us. Small meetings are still held here, bigger ones we have in the ground outside."

To an uninitiated eye, it was a shabby room with peeling paint and blotchy walls where notices and posters for meetings, protests, demonstrations must have been stuck. A couplet of Ahmed Faraz scorched a searing line on my brain:

Ujaarh ghar me yeh khushbu kahan se aati hai

Koi to hai dar-o-diwar ke elava bhi

Thoughts that do not die, desires that cannot be erased, belief that does not change routes, faith that does not forsake, ideology that like a fragrance gives proof of life in barren, crumbling ruins; that does not let the flame of courage flicker and die out. Who has said : individuals die, a movement never does!

Comrade Mateen put his hands in his old waistcoat pocket and stood at the crossing staring above the traffic of fast paced foreign made cars at the still horizon. I, knowing the altercation going on in his heart was silent, waiting for him to answer my question. After a while of silence he hung his head and said in a

sad voice “No comrade, there is none.” I knew this would be his answer, I had been sure. Yet there had been a hope that what no other Indian had been able to find, I would be able to search out. How could it be possible that Lahore could be alive, blooming and blossoming and it would not have a single memorial, a symbol of Shaheed Bhagat Singh. Can any city forget such a son, can a mother negate her womb?

He took the quietest road emerging from the crossing and walked on silently. I had a strange feeling of guilt; as if I too was responsible in some way of forgetting Bhagat Singh’s great sacrifice. The road broadened after about half a kilometer as if approaching another square. He stopped. Bang opposite was a high, strong, stone wall. I thought we had arrived at some old fortress of Lahore.

“This is Lahore jail. Earlier this road was not so broad. It has been broadened a couple of years back and a square has been built here. The jail wall had to be brought down to do this and some inner cells also had to be broken. The place where Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukhdev were hanged was also bulldozed. Party tried its level best to have some memorial erected in that place in their name. But it fell on deaf ears. Pakistan Government treats these martyrs as Indians, Mullahs think of them as Kafir. No school book mentions their name, the younger generation does not even know of their sacrifice. We have not forgotten our past because had we forgotten it there could have been a possibility of reclaiming and remembering it. We have negated it, just wiped it out of the collective memory. Our existence does not begin with this soil, we have fallen from the air. You are trying to hunt for roots in this shallow existence of ours; roots that we have cut and destroyed with our own hands!” Taking off his thick framed spectacles he ran his shirt sleeve over his eyes.

My heart was not willing to accept defeat. Hope would just not let go. There had to be some place. Was it possible that the whole of Lahore would have not a single sign of Bhagat Singh and his comrades. “Maybe there is something in some remote alley or lane and you do not know about it!” A sad smile spread in his eyes “Comrade I know Lahore like the wrinkles on my mother’s face. Trust me!”

I suddenly recalled a conversation with some comrades of Pakistan visiting India. Something they had said emerged from the back of my mind and shaking of the dust of time stood out clear and bold. I put a hand on his shoulder : Comrade I have heard that there is on the bank of Ravi a place where either Bhagat Singh had visited himself or his mortal remains had been cremated. Perhaps it is called the ‘Shaheed Ghat.’

He began to walk without answering and a few steps later flagged an auto-rikshaw and gestured me to be seated. Lahore has practically no taxi-service. One depends on these auto-rikshaws if one does not have a car. The other alternative are the mini-buses which are called mini-devils locally and have a record of one accident a day. The auto-rikshaw looks exactly like its Indian cousin from the front but the behind has undergone a complete Islamization. There are doors on both sides with very small windows, with black or dark blue curtains. There is so little room inside that one has to fold oneself like an envelope and when somehow you push, pull and drag yourself out you find that all the effort of your forefathers to walk straight has been negated in a single ride and you are again walking with a bent back and on four legs. He gave the name of a place to the auto driver and he with hurricane like speed flew us

into the old city. A short walk, a turn into a lane and the narrow lane suddenly opened up, reaching a ghat.

A ghat on the River Ravi. Clean steps, approaching the river and the dusk, the increasing chill, just a couple of people and slow flowing very little water in the river. The minarets of Lahore fort were visible at a distance. Ravi! Its banks have been the rendezvous for lovers, where folk tales and folk songs were born. "We call this place 'Shaheed Ghat comrade' though its official name is something else. Every year we hold a meeting on the Martyr's Day here." My hand moved to pick up a few grains of sand, but my heart refrained. How could such a great sacrifice be linked to just one spot, one place? True, every incident is linked to a location but some incidents break the boundaries of time, place and country. Such incidents wake up the soul of humanity from its lethargic sleep and force it to re-examine its infallible truths and define new destinations. The sand grains slipped from my palm because a bare hand can become the fist which can be raised when we repeat Bhagat Singh's slogan 'Inqalab Zindabad.'

It was dark when we returned back to that area of the city where Hina and Afzal have their office. Both husband and wife together run an FM channel. Both had come to India to attend the Sajjad Zaheer Centenary celebrations in Delhi and Allahabad and IPTA Congress held later in Lucknow. Hina had for the first time in her life attended a protest march and public rally that is always a part of left organized meets in India. She was excited like a child and so enjoying every moment that she refused to accept the vehicle that had been provided for special guests and senior citizens. "So many people, on the road!" "So many slogans! Banners! Songs!" She had chanted happily.

Hina had promised to take me shopping. We got into that deadly contraption of an auto-rikshaw and came to Anarkali, the biggest shopping area in Pakistan. Inside is a special area where women do most of their personal shopping named Bano Bazar. The name itself was so beautiful that one was desperate to reach it. What was displayed ranged from earrings and bangles to shoes and purses, make up and laces to dress material and false hair. Women of all ages felt secure here, many had taken off their hijab and slung it over the arm. Shopkeepers are men, but they have been here for generations and their forefathers have held the hands and adorned them with bangles and bracelets of the mothers and grandmothers of these women. Clients and shopkeepers address each other as 'Bhaijan' and 'Baji', each rupee is haggled for, teasing, jokes and humour are part of life. Shopkeepers keep an ear on the conversation between shoppers and then understanding who the shopping is being done for calmly show the best items taking the absent person's name with familiarity. Manners and decorum keep flowing. Interesting is the fact that very few things have been produced in Pakistan. There is the Indian Zari, zardozi, kamini and salma sitara work, embroidery and ready-made clothing from China, jewelry and trinkets from Taiwan, handbags and shoes from Malaysia and only cloth is Pakistani, very good and very cheap.

I did not have to shop a lot; shopping needs money and we were getting late for the dinner appointment which was scheduled in a big hotel again by some rich patrons of the people who worked for the poor. A short rest and for the first time in my life some hot lassi later we reached the five star hotel. Strange was the atmosphere here. A very beautiful woman was singing in a very off note voice, a poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Several rich guests were getting up again and again and giving her one thousand rupee

notes which she was accepting with shy smiles, deep ardent looks and sighs as if she was weighed down by the work of singing. I raised a questioning eyebrow towards Hina. "Feudalism." she replied grinding her teeth. Kamla Prasad ji and Devtale ji looked desperately unhappy but there was no way but to wait for dinner. A couple of hours later, we swallowed the food and three of us walked out. When we reached the guest house I found on my bed, the poster and pamphlets that I had requested from Zaman bhai; weapons in the struggle for social justice, giving confidence to the deprived and standing with the down trodden; proof of a handful of people who were continuously waging a war for equality.

I had not seen her since reaching Lahore. What could be the matter? She had promised to meet me in Lahore and had kept the hope alive that she would disclose the secrets of understanding and exploring culture and civilization. What could be the meaning of her vanishing like this without information? Was she keeping an eye on me on the sly? I was angry with myself. Of course she was. That is why she would accost me on every crucial turn and give her opinion that would change the direction of my thoughts and show me what was right before me but hidden in the veils drawn by my own misconceptions and stereotypes. I was not irritated by her absence. I was getting worried which had in its roots a fear. I had a split heart; one that was showing me the dark and the frightening and threatening me and making me angry 'you are stupid to have been conned by her. She wove a net of her information and you got caught in it. Why did you not insist that she reveal all her secrets in one go? Right from childhood you have been an introvert. Had you been a bit of an extrovert you would have got after her life and not let go till she revealed everything. The other half of the heart would console me, "she has a will of her own. She became visible on her own, how then can you force her to do anything? You have been right in not insisting, she might have vanished without a trace and then what could you have done? True you have been somewhat of a coward right from childhood, but you can hardly change yourself now."

The first one would make fun of the other's logic "What kind of reasoning is this? You cannot change now! Then face the music; the bird has flown now keep regretting. If you were going to keep quiet, then why allow yourself to get entangled in her trap? Had you come here to participate in your father centenary programme or to gossip with every rainbow coloured shadow? You are one on whom the proverb –Aaye rahe hari bhajan ko autan lage kapaas (Had come to sing the praise of the lord instead began to deseed cotton-wool) fits very well."

"If a being does not get caught in a such a beautiful trap then one is really not human," the second would console and support me. 'Do not worry, she shall come!'

"Come! Yes she shall take an auto-rikshaw and come" the first one made a face. 'Why don't you accept, she has left you in the lurch.'

'Why would she have appeared in the first place like a colourful shadow? Why would she have talked to you and incite you to stand for truth?'

I had no other option but to hold on to the supportive bit of my heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Next day the conference began at the Al-Hamra Arts Council. It had been built by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Faiz Ahmed Faiz was its first chairperson. In 1974 when Faiz Chacha had come to Delhi Ammi had joked with him and said "So now, Faiz you are a very important man and a government official." Faiz Chacha had replied seriously "Yes, indeed Razia Bhabhi, I am a Chairman without the Art or the Council."

Apparently, things had changed from those times. There is a huge building and Painting, Calligraphy and Music is taught here. Groups of boys and girls were sitting on the steps and the lawns playing the guitar and reading aloud to each other.

There were quite a number of people who had spent time with Abba. Comrade Abdullah Malik's younger brother Rauf Ahmed was there. Thin, fair with a smiling face and bubbling personality. He informed of the papers that he has kept safe with him, the documents of the earliest party formation after Pakistan came into being and also has a collection of banned magazines and newspapers. My heart said I should just drop everything and accompany him to his archives. After the seminar my heart cursed me for not having listened to it because nothing of importance was said in the seminar; the same old anecdotes and introductory articles.

There were however two very meaningful speeches. One was in Punjabi and was against religion and God. My own belief was that it was impossible to say anything against Allah or Islam in Pakistan. A Fatwa would be brought against him and he would be left to turn refugee and hunt for asylum in England or America. This gentleman not only gave a speech he also read out a poem against Allah and the audience clapped, enjoyed and appreciated him.

I think the biggest handicap of our times is that we consider the superficial as the factual. Someone respects but does not touch our feet is considered ill mannered, a person not insisting that we hog from his table is considered a bad host and the one who speaks less and does not raise objections loudly is assumed to be weak and spineless. When one is proved wrong and stupid in having believed the stereotypes there is no other way left but to publicly accept one's mistake.

Chandrakant Devtale ji is a well-known poet and has taught Hindi literature to two if not three generations. Between me and Devtale ji, somehow a deep warmth had developed in the first meeting. This was not the emotion that is dependent on blood, neighborhood or village. This was an emotion that very seldom exists between siblings. Throughout the journey no one took so much care of me as he did.

In Lahore, when he was asked to speak I was a bit surprised and somewhat worried. I had no doubt on his being a very good poet, but he speaks Hindi in a soft lyrical tone as if he loves each word of the language that he is speaking and does not wish to part with it. Would his speech spoken in a mild, delicate manner be understood and appreciated by this audience? Two very fire spewing poems have just been read and have received their share of applause. Would his intellectual speech stand a chance after them? Then he proceeded to bring out his diary and selected a poem from it. I had my heart in my mouth. How can any sister see her brother's creative work go unappreciated?

Why do we harbour so many fears? Don't we have the example of Ghalib whose poems were first sung by the beggars and the prostitutes? Has Pablo Neruda been dead for so long that we have forgotten that his poems had written a non-erasable red revolution on the hearts of the nickel miners and had become the reason for Salvador Allende's success in the elections?

When four lines had been read out, I cast a glance on both sides. The audience was appreciating every word, insisting that every line be read again. After the poem, his speech was aimed at United States of America that had cast its dark shadow over entire Asia. He was speaking, and the crowd was clapping after every three sentences----and there was me! Ashamed, cursing my fears, angry at my doubts. Then suddenly my head went up with pride; these are my people who even after crossing seventy are still holding the front in the battle for social justice; who do not lose a single opportunity to hit out at the enemy; who, on the basis of poetry and literature are keeping the war going which has been given up by those who seemed to be well equipped with deadly weapons; who are still holding fort when the so called great warriors have shown their backs. They who are loyal to the call "Rise! The call from the front to all those empty hands."

I was still engrossed in sorting out my feelings between pride and shame when I heard a whispered conversation "He is calling Sajjad Zaheer Banne Bhai."

"His name was announced as Chandrakant Devtale, so must be a Hindu."

"Yet he is calling a Muslim his brother!."

Devtale ji was addressing Abba as Banne bhai. Then he paused and said "I have never met Sajjad Zaheer. But ever since I have read Noor Zaheer's 'Mere Hisse Ki Roshnai' I think of Sajjad Zaheer as Banne Bhai. I cannot think of him as anything else."

How explain my heart's condition; I can only narrate an incident : once Abba had come back from a trip to London, extremely happy. Perhaps he had revisited the haunts of his youth or maybe he had met some old and dear friends or made some new ones. He was narrating incidents and stories with such enjoyment that I couldn't help asking "Abba you are so fond of London; you have so many friends there. Why didn't you go to London after your release from Pakistan jail?"

The whole family was having dinner together. Everyone was now staring at him Perhaps Ammi was hoping that he would say that he wished to return to his dear wife or perhaps the three sisters wished to hear him say that he came back for them. I was of course not born till then, but I would have been happy had he said, "Had I not come back how would you have been sitting here?" Or maybe all of us wished to hear a fiery speech that ended with "I came back to continue the struggle for a revolution here." But Abba had replied solemnly "I wished to come back to my country."

I cannot say if my book has been able to do justice to Abba's struggle, contribution and his personality. But if it has been able to remove the formality and decorum of 'Sajjad Zaheer' and writers of India now remember him as 'Banne bhai' then it is indeed enough satisfaction and happiness for me.

Surprisingly women were almost completely absent from the Lahore celebrations. There were a few coming and going amongst the audience but there were none who were speakers or seated in a position of honor. As far as I know there are several important women writers of Pakistan who live in Lahore and Islamabad. Were they not informed or invited? Both the daughters of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and three daughters of Manto were also conspicuous by their absence. Comrade Tahira Ali came a little late but my desire to meet her was quenched. Comrade Mazhar Ali and his wife Comrade Tahira Ali were comrades of Sajjad Zaheer and their son, the well-known writer Tariq Ali has written about the times Abba was hidden in their house. This was also the reason why both of them had to suffer and spend time in prison later on. Even at eighty plus, her commitment to Marxism is as strong. Two years ago, Comrade Mazhar Ali passed away.

Meeting with Tahira Khala turned into a yearning in my heart; I wished, I really wished at eighty, if I lived that long to become as interesting an old woman as her. She is not tall but has a strong body. Shining eyes normally do not stay at a point for long but if she is listening to someone in a deep serious conversation then they stare right into the soul of the speaker. In the audience she listens carefully to what is being said from the stage and continues with her commentary. She is very well read and very aware of current happenings all over the world but at the drop of a hat asks people to a 'Sarson Saag' and 'Makki ki Roti' lunch; she loves the world but is really in love with Lahore. She could have been a great source of information of the early days of the formation of Pakistan Communist Party. Why was she not asked to speak and not even invited to sit on the dais?

After the seminar, there was an informal tea laid outside in the sun. A young Pakhtoon comrade came up to me and began discussing the rise of terrorism in KPK. He was wearing the Pathan cap and I could not stop myself from asking him to accompany me to one of the shops that sold such caps for my son. He made some vague excuse and vanished. I sighed thinking poor fellow is probably shy of being seen accompanying a strange woman. I was getting myself another cup of tea when he was back with a similar cap that he shyly extended towards me. When I put my hand in my pocket he turned pink and said in an offended voice "This is for my nephew. Kindly do not interfere between us."

I saw Hameed Akhtar chacha walking up to me. We had to start for India tomorrow morning and this would be my last meeting with him. He began talking as usual without any formality informing me with what difficulty he had managed to make his wife give up the Purda; though she had accepted that it was a form of repression but would still wear it sometimes out of habit. Finally Hameed chacha took the burqa to the field nearby and set it on fire. Then he laughed and narrated how his son had to take the same course with his wife. Suddenly he put his hand on my shoulder and said "Noor I have something of importance to say to you." I turned to him thinking it was some admonition coming. "This book you have written is good and has been published in both Hindi and Urdu. It shall also be published here. Daughter, see to it that this does not stop here. This is the real inheritance from Banne Bhai and Razia Bhabhi. Keep nurturing it."

The entire subcontinent has this tradition that it is the duty of the elders to give and the right of the younger ones to demand. My generation is so fortunate that we have never had to demand anything

from our elders. They are desperate to give. All my life I have been handed these gems adding to my treasure, making it priceless.

It was almost dark when we reached the area that is considered the most interesting and popular one of this city the 'Lahore Food Street.' Well known cricketer turned politician Imran Khan has often been quoted as saying that the food served in these lanes is the best in the world. As Kaifi Chacha [Kaifi Azmi] used to say 'a man without a taste for good food has no right to be alive.' Even I believe that the human brain has used its maximum creative resources in inventing cuisines. My worst nightmare has been when I dreamt of all the cooks around me having forgotten to cook. I woke up in cold sweat with a blazing temperature. The fever continued for several days and when all homely recipes failed it was suggested that I should be taken to the hospital. Next day was Shab-e-Baraat and Ammi not sure of what might happen at the hospital, I might be admitted decided to make the halwa and prepare the meat for the Biryani. As the fragrance of the roasting of Chane ki Daal for Halwa and meat for Biryani wafted down from the kitchen to my nose the fever vanished like the horns are said to have vanished from the head of a donkey. The purpose was back in my life and future suddenly became bright again. I had been longing to go to the Food Street.

The lights were visible from a distance and the bright moving crowd was inviting. Cars are not allowed in this area because the tables and chairs are set outside on the roads. As we walked we were drowned in stools, benches, tables, folding chairs. Eateries on both sides with huge pans of gravies, curries and soups, open fires with roasting kebabs, tikka and chicken, ovens that would open their flaming guts, swallow raw naans, kulchas, rotis and baqarkhaanis and in a few moments return hot breads to be served with piping curried meat in deep dishes. On long iron rods were slung full chicken, mutton and sheep legs, patridges, quails that would be roasted over open fires, on sharp hooks were lined large chunks of meat, ducks and chicken, cleaned, trussed and marinated in spices. One had only to select a piece and it would be served on the table within minutes. Well fed, smooth, oily faced chefs and assistant cooks, armed with sharp knives would slice off from a chunk, cut it into pieces and then beat it to a mince before one could say Jack Robinson. This place was less of a market, more like the picture of the purgatory described in Bible.

Several shops had a huge tree trunk outside and one person could be seen armed with a sword in each hand, pounding something in rhythm. Later the pounded would be transferred to a thick girdle with lots of oil and again pounded, stirred and basted while it was being cooked. The sound changed but the rhythm continued. I was told it was 'Gosht katakat'. Never having tasted this dish, I opted for it and the chef pointed to the pieces of meat hung over his head. I did not understand, and a friend explained that he was asking me to select the pieces I wanted in the dish. No Manipuri martial artiste can match the rhythm that this chef created on the girdle. Within a few minutes he ladled it in a plate and put it before me. The smell of roasting and burning meat, mixed with oil, smoke and spices filled our nostrils. Maybe if I had eaten 'gosht katakat' somewhere else I would have enjoyed it. But somehow I could not progress beyond two mouthfuls. Seeing me pushing away the plate Sarwat asked "What is the matter Baji?" In reply I asked her the Amir Khusro riddle "Gosht kyun na khaya/ Raag kyun na gaaya?". She stared at me non-plussed and I replied "gala na tha."

Sarvat understood, smiled and said, "Let us go and hunt for something sweet." At the thought of a dessert I ran an eye on both sides but could not trace any sweet shop. Both of us decided to walk the street. There seemed to be no shop of sweet or of paan. Walking back, we decided to question the shopkeepers and in a niche found the shop of sweets selling 'pheerni' set in mud bowls. Traditionally pheerni should be ground rice cooked in milk, in the proportion of one is to sixteen that is one kilogram of rice in sixteen kilograms of milk. Thickened and sweetened it is poured into deep earthenware dishes which further absorb its liquid to set in a way that it can be overturned without being disturbed. "Where are you from?" I inquired of the gentleman sitting at the cash box. "Now we belong to Lahore but originally we are from where you are." Ah! Recognition in a few words, the use of the royal plural 'we' instead of 'I'; reassurance enough. We bought several bowls of pheerni and moved towards the others. On the way we met Rakesh bhai and Devtale ji. Poor things were hunting for some vegetarian dish. We immediately offered them pheerni only to realise that in our joy of finding the desert we had forgotten to take any spoons. We licked pheerni with our fingers laughing and giggling like adolescents.

Our dinner had been arranged in one of the bigger restaurants of the Food Bazar, that had enough space inside for a sit in. Other members of the delegation came back from their round of the market and all of us moved to the restaurant to spend our last evening, have our last meal in Pakistan.

The dinner was being hosted by Abid Hasan Manto. Now do not be so surprised dear reader. He is not the Manto who wrote such stories on the partition of India, man's barbarianism and man's humanism that became the ever-burning red hot embers in literature. The rulers of Pakistan had awarded them with medal of obscenity, crowned him with vulgarity and accused him of selling his writing through indecency and lewdness. He was put behind bars with criminals. The one who had been imprisoned was an active volcano, his pen emitting scalding lava; the one who was released from the prison was a broken, tired, lonely man for whom society had left no other alternative but alcohol.

Time proved the accusers wrong and picking up the fallen Manto placed him on that peak in literature where language, community, religion and form discard their boundaries. He was Saadat Hasan Manto and the one hosting us was Abid Hasan Manto, a far very far away relative of the our Manto. This one is a critic and a lawyer. Some of his books are available in India too. He sticks to the right side of the left which means that he gets on with people from all kinds of ideologies or no ideologies. He has visited India several times. His wife too is a writer.

The food was excellent and included vegetables and Dahi Bade. His wife had recently fractured her left hand but despite the plaster she was not only present but serving and taking care that everyone had enough to eat. Like everywhere else, at the end began a round of speeches. Kamla Prasad ji as the leader of the delegation gave a short speech thanking the Pakistani hosts for the care and warmth shown to us. Then a few others also spoke. Right in the end Manto Sahib got up to speak.

Manto sahib has an elderly attitude and expects people to listen to him. Problem is that he does not just wish to be heard; he also expects the listeners to accept his opinion and totally agree with him. He began his speech by telling us how difficult it was to get a Visa for India. If one was to request a Visa for thirty days, one would get it for just fifteen and why is there a restriction of three cities; and why does it

often happen that a person requesting visa for Delhi and Lucknow, gets it for Delhi and Agra. Someone amongst us reminded him that it is the same with Indians wishing to visit Pakistan who are treated in the same manner and that our delegation had been granted Visa just twenty four hours before our planned journey. He tried to cover up by saying that if such a thing is happening then it was very bad, but India being a bigger country should show generosity and make the first move.

After this he turned to other things. According to him when such a big delegation of writers of one country visits another, then its only purpose should be to meet, discuss and share thoughts and ideas with the intellectuals of the host country. They must remember that they are not ordinary tourists, they are responsible intellectuals. He thought that we should have come directly to Lahore after the seminar in Larkana, while we had wasted so much time in Sehwan and Mohenjo Daro. After all what did we gain in those ruins? What is the sense of spending time on what is past, what is over and done with? What is important is the present. When he visits India he does not waste a minute in seeing Taj Mahal or Ajanta and Ellora and other historical sites because he believed in the living today rather than the dead and barren yesterday. He said that people often complained that he had earlier been completely identified with the Marxist philosophy but he no longer did so. The reason was that Marxism was the yesterday and to continue to stick to the past was outright stupidity because it can never be revived nor can the present molded to suit the past-----etc. etc. He gave so many reasons: what is and what isn't and why what is cannot be what isn't and how can what isn't ever be what is that I began to see dancing stars inside the room. After having thrown to the dustbin both archeology and Marxism he cast a long look on the left leaning delegation of Indian writers as if to say, "Can anyone dare to contest my stand?" then before anyone could say anything he smiled and added "Let us not waste time on speeches and arguments. This is your last night here and you have a long journey tomorrow. Enjoy the food, rest through the night and tomorrow be fresh and rested for the crossing."

He was the host. Was that why all of us continued to eat in silence.? Or were we really accepting his opinion as the truth? Did all of us have a hidden thief in our hearts and our faith in our ideology had been shaken? Were we also convinced that Marxism was over and done with and the effort to keep it alive was only romanticism?

Gulping down the food, me and Dr. Ali Ahmed Fatmi took the hosts permission with the excuse that we wanted to have a look at the Red Fort by night and came out. Khagendra ji and Devtale ji followed us. I inhaled deeply of the clean air after the suffocating atmosphere inside. Were all four of us feeling a heaviness in our heads? Walking down we reached the portion where Allama Iqbal is buried. A red sand stone monument to match the rest of the red fort. Inside is a white grave of marble which we could not see, because the tomb closed at 7 pm. Inside this fort is also the prison which is known as the Bloody Jail of Pakistan. Sajjad Zaheer and Faiz Ahmed Faiz had been imprisoned here. No one knows what all happened to Abba while he was in Pakistan jails. He himself never liked to talk about it. Yes, on his back, just above the waist was a two and a half inch wound that refused to heal. Time and again it would turn painful and trouble him. It was treated both in India and in USSR but to no effect. Once Ammi took him to a very well-known Hakim. He examined the wound and said that he could not heal the wound, but could treat it so that it would not remain painful; a black scab would form over the wound which would fall off at the change of every season and then reappear. Abba had this scab till his last days and I

remember seeing Ammi removing it. Was this wound a gift of this fort? It was this fort where Comrade Hasan Nasir had been tortured and killed. His body had so many torture wounds that the Pakistani government had been afraid of an international outrage. When his mother had come to claim the body, she was shown a different body. Hasan Nasser's height was six feet four inches but the body that was shown to her was merely five feet and six inches. His mother had refused to accept the body and had returned to India empty handed. How many sacrifices, pain and torture this fort has swallowed and continues to stand with its head held high.

If she was my friend and sympathizer, she should have come; at least here she should have been with me. These were the last few hours we had in Lahore. When will she come? When tell me everything, when answer my questions? What would be my reaction to what she would tell me? As far as I could understand she had not come because I had been so involved in so many other things. Maybe she was not able to find space to fit herself in my busy schedule. Anyways, then she would definitely come tonight. Packing is all done, I would be able to talk to her at length. I shall wait up for her or she might leave finding me asleep. Till now she has not hesitated from waking me up. But who knows, she might find me tired and change her mind. Yes, it would be best not to fall asleep.

"Oh Baji, what kind of a posture are you sleeping in?" I woke up with Sarvat's voice. I had been up the whole night and at dawn had laid my head on the pillow thinking to rest my back and had dozed off. I woke up hurriedly to find Sarvat vanishing into the bathroom.

So, she had not come! She had lulled me with romantic dreams and having faith in those dreams I had believed that I would be able to achieve a lot. I shall take off this ordinary garb of life that has been flung on me since birth, toss it away and begin to do something different. I shall leave the road smoothened by innumerable feet and take a new path that would lead me to a light I had never seen before and from that I shall create something to prove my existence, my being; I would no longer be just a weight on this earth; I would stop taking from humanity and begin the process of giving; decisions on important issues, that threaten to turn my life topsy turvy I shall not leave for the next birth; I would face them now. I shall live!

THE LAST WORD

Four or five cars brought us to the border. Happy to be returning home, satisfied that the Sajjad Zaheer Centenary Celebrations, Pakistan Chapter had been completed successfully there was still an ache in my heart. There was so much left to know, to say, to do! This side as well as that side.

As we left the city and took the highway we found it being widened and piles of mud, gravel and stones lined on both sides. Three or four road rollers were moving up and down the new road preparing it for tarring, several excavator loaders, with jaws wide open were waiting for the mix of tar and gravel to spread.

Custom officers saw so many books in our baggage, made a face and chalk marked all our cases quickly. On the Pakistani border we turned to have a last look at comrades who had come to see us off. Some raised their hand to salaam, some just waved. There was no knowing when and if we would meet again.

We walked the few metres and entered the gates manned by white socked, black shoed jawans of the Indian army. A bus had been hired to take us to Amritsar Railway station. Piling our bags in it we sat down to sample the tea at one of the dhabas. Casting a glance around we saw that several dhabas had been repaired and painted. Several nearby houses seemed to have added rooms and the boards on shops proclaimed their names in Hindi, Gurumukhi and Urdu. An old Sardar ji, who must have run one of the dhabas in his youth and now sat proudly sunning himself on the cot ordering his sons and servants around, turned his experienced eyes towards me and informed "Going and coming is increasing and people coming are bound to be late sometimes! And this is Military run arrangement. If gates are closed, then that is it! People need a room to spend the night."

Travel was on the rise between the two countries. Governments had accepted that political disagreements and army stationed on the border were one thing, and people's relationship and friendship was another.

"Which means we shall meet again."

I did not turn to look at her but I knew she was waiting for an answer "I am not sure I wish to meet you again."

"That is your wish but you must understand that there are other things that need my immediate attention."

"Why must I always be so understanding of your version, your perception?"

"You too have to left stories incomplete. Don't you promise yourself to come back to them; often you do return but to a different ending, a new finale, sometimes you give them up as having lost their relevance for you, for society, for time; sometimes you have forgotten them and can't understand the context of the notes that you had made; but actually, it is the stories that have realized that they have waited long enough for you and decide to walk away. Such is life, such are relationships, and such is the world because everything is a story, some portions narrated, some yet untold."

"So, to complete this story I have to come back to Pakistan?"

"Come back you will because you love to travel and every traveler crosses her own path; whether the story shall be completed is a totally different sequence."

"And you shall meet me."

"Stories are always around, a meeting is the result of both you and the story willing to find each other."

XX

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER ONE

I have already answered this question four times; 'you must remember that the person questioning is doing so for the first time; keep calm.' From the past Ammi's voice admonishes me. I swallow my rising anger. The first time it came from the man in the AC compartment of Punjab Mail. He was traveling with his family for the International Ahmediya Conference to be held at the Ahmediya Muslim Headquarters in Qadian, Gurdaspur. 'You are travelling alone!' Why the surprise? I travel everywhere alone, so? Or should a woman not be travelling alone to Pakistan? Then it was the driver of the taxi I booked from Amritsar station to Atari Border. He is an old Sikh gentleman, polite and to the point like most of his community but cannot resist asking this question. I resist asking him if the fare would be less or more for a single person and smile saying 'yes,' he asks to see my passport. A single woman foolishly travelling alone to Pakistan, might just be inane enough to do so without a Passport. I look him straight in the eye, refuse and move to the other smarter taxis. He runs after me, apologizes takes my suitcase and walks to his shabby ambassador. I calculate how much time this ramshackle vehicle would take to cover the 35 kilometres to the border. On the way he suggests I give him the Passport and let him make the initial entries. I refuse again saying I am quite capable of getting down and meeting the army personnel manning the entry gate prior to the customs. He stares at me in the rear mirror, I stare back; he nods and both of us return to looking at the road. I do not have a lot of baggage, but the trolley is available only through a coolie who again politely asks if I am alone. I say with a straight face, 'no no, there are three more with me; they are in the taxi.'" He looks inside, seems a bit confused and then bursts out laughing. I laugh with him put a hand on the trolley and ask him his wages. 'No' I resist at his 'give me whatever pleases you' and ask him the price. He laughs again. Hard working people don't have to join Park Yoga Laughter Clubs to laugh. We settle the price and saunter towards the customs on my instructions. I want to take in everything. The gentleman at the customs counter repeats the question and I interrupt midway saying "yes, I am alone!" He asks me to wait and wait is what I do for a good 25 minutes. Twice I walk up to the desk to ask what the delay is; at least three couples and four families have floated through unhindered while I waited.

At last he returns, hands me the passport and says by way of explanation "Your face doesn't match the picture in the passport."

"Yes, it is ten years younger." He looks nonplussed and stutters "What....but....!!!"

"The passport was issued in 2004 and it is last week of 2013 now. And no, it has not expired, but will in October 2014. The visa issuance requires six months validity of the passport and since the visa is only for 20 days there is no possibility of my staying on till October."

The fellow almost collapses and runs inside again to consult his seniors. I watch him running from one cubicle to the other through the glass partition before he finally disappears in a closed room. Hopefully it is dysentery and not an objection that is making him run in and out. He returns only to ask me if I carry a recent photograph with me. I don't but am willing to pay for getting myself photographed. It is not possible I am told, but I can call back home, from the public landline, ask someone to scan my recent photograph and fax it to a number that he can give me. Scan and email is not acceptable since the Indian government still works in the back date when faxing had been fashionable. He smiles smugly with the assurance of knowing that a middle aged, Indian woman would not be able to manage all this.

'Beta you do not know what stuff we communists are made of.' I say in my heart as I jot down the number and move to the phone booth hoping that my younger daughter Surdhani would be at home, not asleep and would pick up the unknown number. The circle works, she picks up her phone on the third ring, listens attentively, asks me not to worry and that she would find the photograph, locate a cyber café with a fax machine and fax it within an hour. An hour and half and several queries later the customs officer admits that he has received a fax. His gaze travels down on the A4 sheet and he hands it to me. On it are 19 pictures of me of all ages. Surdhani had stuck all the pictures she could find on a sheet of paper and faxed them. No wonder she took that extra half an hour. He stamps my passport and handing it to me says "Was that your husband or your son who managed it."

"My daughter." I smile proudly. "Woman power." I cannot resist adding as I walk past his counter. The porter smiles at my obvious victory and pushes the trolley outside. No walkover this time. It is nine years since my last visit and things are bound to change but I wish this one thing had remained the same. I had so wanted to meet the 'no man's land' again. But I cannot. Modernization has brought comfortable buses that ferry the travelers in a couple of minutes across to the other border. No Man's Land is now only scraped, scratched and grazed by the army boots from both sides at the closing of gates ceremony every single day. As a dancer I had been explained the 'Bhoomi Pranam', 'Forgive me mother earth for I shall be hurting you with my hard-hitting feet for some time.' The soft touch of civilian feet that must have been like balm on her wounds, no longer tread the loving breast of Mother Earth.

The Pakistani customs is quicker, or maybe it seems so to me because the custom officers, all men are extremely good looking. As a writer I like to be surrounded with good looks, as a straight woman, good looking men have an edge. His surprise at finding me unaccompanied is quickly hidden as he says, "Welcome to Pakistan." Good looking and well mannered, this trip despite a jinxed beginning seems promising. The jinx wasn't my being alone or my photograph not matching me, it had begun when my host Aslam Khwaja had made a drastic change in the plan.

Something about Aslam Khwaja before I proceed; though found through the Facebook, he is the younger brother I never had. Actually, he had found me and inquired if I was Comrade Sajjad Zaheer's daughter; then had followed a thorough research on the Wikipedia which convinced him that I was not the usual 'father selling, luxury loving kind of daughter', these are his words. Two years ago, in 2012 we had met for the first time when I had invited him for a Sufi Conference in Amritsar organized by Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature [FOSWAL]. He did not accompany the Pakistani delegation because he had taken an intense dislike to the lady coordinating for us from Karachi, Pakistan. I rather liked that because I like people who trust their intuitions. When I found him, the second day at the Seminar he was not looking for me or one of the other organizers, he was waiting in the queue to be served tea. When recognized and asked why he hadn't come up to me he had said without batting an eyelid "But my requirement for tea was more intense!" Being addicted to tea myself I can quite understand the emotion that overcomes one on seeing the tea thermos. He was late by a day and all rooms had been given away. Aslam had made no objections to sharing a room with my son Anuran. He had also smoked like a chimney so had to keep leaving the hall where boring papers were being read out every twenty minutes. In his behavior he was a comrade, in his habits a vagabond and in his attire a

fakir; all reason that made him a lovable brother! But one who should never have been trusted with planning the trip and sticking to the plan.

In 2013 Aslam had visited Delhi and stayed with me for ten days. Accompanying him was a young journalist Hafeez Chachar who had come to India to explore venues for writing and sharing news of Pakistan with one of the Indian Channels. In keeping with the South Asian tradition and because Aslam treated me as an elder sister, Hafeez began to call me 'Ma.'

Aslam was supposed to meet me in Lahore. It was planned that we would spend a couple of days there, meet my publisher, see the new collection of my short stories that he had published and then travel by train to Karachi. He had been emailing me beginning with "when we are in Lahore; we shall have to do this or we must meet so and so in Lahore etc." Four days before I was to leave Delhi 'we' changed to 'you', asking me when and how was I planning to reach Karachi and that he would meet me at the station or airport. I was aghast! How did he expect me to navigate through Lahore customs and find my way to the Human Rights Guest House where A.R.Rehman and Zaman Khan had very kindly arranged a room for me? Lahore has no taxis, at least not on the Wagah Border. What about the train reservation that he was supposed to have made? What about the more than 24 hour long journey from Lahore to Karachi, alone? I was on the verge of calling off the trip. But this was a visa I had been given after two refusals. How could I not avail it? And then what is one to do when the travel bug has decided to gnaw one's feet: only the road can quell this itch.

And so, I emailed another friend requesting help. This gentleman has pretensions to being a poet and had also attended the Amritsar Sufi Conference. But when I had inquired the name of his published anthologies he had very proudly said "I am unpublished." It seemed as if he was introducing himself and that is how I think of him 'Unpublished.' On his return home Unpublished had sent an email of thanks and I had answered back appreciating his participation. He was so enthusiastic that I had contacted him, so sure that I fully depended on him that I began to think up means to sedate the travel bug. But this bug once awakened refuses to hibernate again. I referred to Aslam, who relieved at my having fixed up another escort vowed to help me get rid of Unpublished the minute I landed in Karachi. I should have known better but then I have traveled all over the world, always alone, comfortable in my body and being. So why should I have been worried just because this time it was Pakistan? 'Don't be silly' I scolded myself and began buying gifts for friends.

Unpublished was there as I emerged out of the customs and spread out his arms. I normally like hugging friends, but he really was not a friend. "You are not being crucified you know" I joked, and a squeaky laughter came from behind him. Unpublished had come accompanied by a 'chamcha' who happened to be also the General Secretary of Progressive Writers Association of KPK. At least that is how he was introduced to me. Unpublished had no other option but to grin, bring down his arms and shake hands with me.

A faded, dented at several places red car that in its younger days must have been a smart one was waiting, and I was taken to the Human Rights Commission Guest House. Hawaldar Mohammad Bashir, the one who had been there nine years before was still the caretaker, a bit older, somewhat worn out

and dilapidated but with the same smile and sharp eyes. He carried my baggage to my room, made excellent tea and looked inquiringly at Unpublished accompanying me, pointedly saying “Room is booked only for Madam!”

I thanked my stars for the existing morality and patriarchal propriety as Unpublished made a face and left. I settled down, showered, changed and decided to take a walk. Down the road I discovered the Shakir Ali Museum. This used to be the residence of the famous painter Shakir Ali who was the pioneer of nude painting in Pakistan. He donated his home to the state and now the Pakistan National Council of Arts is managing it.

Electricity is a major problem in Pakistan and I was only halfway through when it was cut off. The staff is quite used to this and quickly brought out large torches to help the lost visitors find their way out. On the porch I asked one of the attendants why there was no generator. The man had just begun answering when he stopped abruptly, pointed to a car stopping at the gate and said, “you can ask madam!”. From it emerged a smart lady who was purposefully walking inside when she stopped seeing my sari and asked ‘India?’ I am always perturbed when Pakistanis use India instead of the Urdu ‘Hindustan’. I nodded, and she graciously invited me for tea which was served outside under the tree. It turned out that she was a director at the Ministry of Culture and in charge of the art galleries. It was wonderful talking to her and sharing with her the pros and cons of curating exhibitions and handling private collections. I asked her why there were no generators and she after a pause said honestly “There is very little money for culture.” True, everywhere there seems to be no support for cultural activities and where there was it is being curtailed and reduced. Culture is no longer a top priority of any country in Asia. Was it ever? Didn’t Kalidas the great poet and playwright work as a Minister in the Court of Emperor Vikramaditya to be able to earn enough to support his writing? Anyways we both talked at length over the way culture is being neglected in India and Pakistan and how both governments are not helpful to each other in preserving each other’s culture which was actually one heritage.

She left as the sun dipped and I walked back to the guest house where Hafeez was waiting for me. Hafeez had bought a sim for me which meant that I could now connect with friends. Hafeez Chachar is based in Islamabad but was in Lahore for some work. I promised to call and meet him in Islamabad and he left soon.

CHAPTER TWO

My first night in Lahore and I am lying awake planning how to get rid of Unpublished tomorrow. I had paid him for my air ticket, but he had not given me the ticket. Somewhere I had a nagging feeling that this leech would be difficult to get rid of. I picked up the phone and dialed a number. It was a land line and I should not be calling so late at night, but this was the only thing I could do. Someone picked up and said ‘Malik Residence’ and half a minute later I was speaking to Irfan Malik. He had emailed that he might be in Lahore at the same time as me and even if he was not I could ask for any help from his brothers.

Irfan Malik is a comrade who had to leave Pakistan to avoid arrest, torture and probably death during the Zia-ul-Haq regime. He now lives in the US but visits 'lo'ore' as Lahoris call it, every other year. Irfan was in Pakistan for his nephew's wedding and tied up the next day but very willing to spend the day after that with me. Lahore Museum and Lawrence Garden was planned. I fell asleep almost at once.

Unpublished came almost an hour late with another friend who was supposed to know Lahore like the back of his hand. Well if I could see the lanes and alleys of Lahore and maybe Lahore Fort from inside then I should be able to survive Unpublished. We manipulated lane after lane, alleys and squares with me hoping that we would stop and walk the lanes and the car slipping through one portion of old Lahore to another. It took me half an hour to understand that Unpublished was showing me Lahore from the car window. I balked, asked the driver to stop and got out before anyone could question me. I had seen a few music shops and was soon in a deep discussion with a portly gentleman manning one shop about the sale of musical instruments, effects of Islamization on music and the history of Hira Mandi the well-known area of the nautch girls of Lahore. Unpublished entered just then, caught the word Hira Mandi and gave me a shocked look. "Noor, we should leave now." He demanded imperiously.

"No, tea has been ordered for me and I like talking to musicians; yes, so you were telling me about Gauhar Jan's visit to Lahore. Did she perform her famous Raaga Kedar here?"

The salesman more a musician and obviously deprived of music talk warmed up to the subject and I spent a wonderful half an hour with Rashid bhai, the friend Unpublished had brought joining in. Rashid bhai offered to walk with me to the Red Fort showing me the famed 'kothas' of Heera Mandi. The saying goes "Andhe ko kya chahiye? Do aankhe" (What does a blind man desire? Two eyes!) I do not agree. A blind man in my opinion would be quite happy with just one eye, as I was now. We walked to the Fort, Rashid Sahab pointing out various landmarks including the place that sold the best 'paye' and where we would have lunch, manipulating the steep climb with Unpublished panting behind and Rashid bhai showing me the path that led to the torture chamber.

It is a strange feeling to see the place where one's heroes had been held, tortured and killed. It is not open to public, but one can reach quite close because now the torture chamber has been moved to a bigger, unknown place. This is the place where Faiz Ahmed Faiz had been kept for three months. The prisoners would be allowed to come to a wall and put out their hand from the narrow opening made for archers to shoot attackers. In the open ground outside would collect relatives and friends hoping to recognize the hand of their loved one and be assured that he was alive and able to stand on his feet. Alys Faiz has written how she would stand with her two daughters and tell them "one of those is your father's hand."

This torture chamber was specially designed for political prisoners and considered to be one of the worst torture rooms in the world. Irfan Malik too would have been brought here had he not been informed and had he not had a Swedish wife who managed their escape just in the nick of time. Hasan Nasir had not been so fortunate and so many more. There is no difference in the behavior of the state towards dissenters; there never is room for honest debate, discussion between the rulers and the masses and no space for that small group of people who challenge the state as the spokesmen of people.

I am on the top of Red Fort, as high as I can go and something like a Gurudwara is visible quite close by. I look at Rashid bhai and he smiles "That is Gurudwara Dehra Sahib. It was built at the place where after severe torture, the fifth Guru Arjan Dev was drowned in the Ravi. At that time, the Ravi flowed along the wall of the fort. The Guru after enduring the most unheard and unseen tortures ordered by the Moghul King, without repining, merged into the eternal light. Maharaja Ranjit Singh got a small but beautiful Gurudwara built at the site. Nearby is the Samadhi of Maharaja Ranjit Singh." And suddenly I wanted to see the Gurudwara. I seldom like to visit religious places, but the urge is very strong.

"Is it open?"

"Of course. Want to go?" Rashid bhai had warmed up to me ever since I walked up the steep of the fort without losing my breath. We wove our way back when Unpublished interjected saying "We should eat now."

"At twelve?" Then I have a brainwave "Is the Gurudwara functioning?"

"Of course! Pakistan government has to maintain its secular image" Rashid bhai laughed.

"Then no problem, there will be Karha Prasad to quell hunger pangs." I said walking fast now that we were going downwards.

On the gate at the Gurudwara the security stops us "Only Hindus and Sikhs allowed inside." I saw the smug expression on Unpublished's face as he turned to leave. Once in a blue moon my brain moves so fast I am afraid it will run away from me. "But I am a Hindu, an Indian." "Passport" he extends his hand. "I left it at the hotel, but I have my voter ID." My passport says, 'Noor Zaheer wife of Amitabh Dasgupta' but my voter ID says, 'Noor wife of Amitabh Dasgupta.' It works, and I am inside. Rashid bhai mumbles "someone must go with her" and slips inside; a Granthi recognizes and hails him before the security can stop him. Both of us laugh at our success as I realize that he is a regular here.

We spend a good half an hour; does anyone here remember the days when there would be a string of worshippers praying for help and protection at the shrine that stands so alone, so unprotected today? Two Granthis accompany us showing us the important places and insisting on giving us large helpings of the Karha Prasad. How lonely they must be; spending day after day with an abandoned god? They tell us how Maharaja Ranjit Singh died after a long spell of paralysis and his eleven queens committed Sati, burnt in the same pyre. I wish I hadn't been told this; the halwa in my mouth turns to sawdust and I walk faster towards the exit. I try to lighten my mood with "I wonder why my halwa never turns out this good." Rashid bhai looks at me and seems to understand my feeling of desolation.

Unpublished is fuming outside and refuses the halwa. He sends for the car before I can intervene and walk some more. "So, you change your religion at will?" Unpublished asks as we are waiting for the car.

"I am an atheist and do not have a religion. I wanted to see the Gurudwara and this was the only way I could do so."

"We have time after lunch and shall visit Daata Durbar. If you do one you should do the others as well."

“Why? I have no desire to visit a Sufi shrine, especially during the Urs. It is dirty, overcrowded and reeks of cheap incense and attar. I could do the Sacred Hearts Cathedral though. I have been told that it has recently been restored and it would be nice to see the secular side of Pakistan showing itself after years of martial Islamization.” Rashid bhai smirks as Unpublished glowers and shrugs his shoulders.

The paye are delicious and sheermal hot and soft. Me and Rashid Bhai share a plate of paye and one sheermal. Unpublished seems angry at the comradery that has developed between Rashid Bhai and me. I wish he would lose his temper and leave. But I am not so fortunate. There is a meeting with some writers to plan the launch of my book, the main reason for which I have come. I had asked Rashid Bhai during our Gurdwara round if he knew some women activists and could he invite them to the evening meeting. He now told me that Saeeda Diep had just confirmed that she would be coming. Saeeda Diep runs the Institute for Peace and Secular Studies, stands for women’s rights and humanity. I have heard a lot about her. The other is Neelam Ahmed Basheer, a very well-known short story writer. I have met her once before in a SAARC writers conference. The meeting has been arranged at Pak Tea House and the venue itself gives me goose bumps.

Pak Tea House is situated near Anarkali Bazaar on the Mall Road. Rashid Bhai smiles and adds “It is walkable.” He has by now discovered my love for seeing a city on foot. Unpublished protests trying to seem caring “Noor shall get tired”

“I shall be sitting for a good two hours later at the café. Let’s walk.”

Pak Tea House is believed to have been set up in 1932 and was owned by a Sikh Business family of Lahore who sold it when they migrated to India in 1947 to Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). A couple of years later a local food supplier named Sirajuddin Ahmad rented the building from YMCA and continued operating it as a coffee and tea joint. The place was traditionally frequented by the city’s artistic, cultural and literary personalities like [Faiz Ahmed Faiz](#), [Saadat Hasan Manto](#), [Ibn-e-Insha](#), Mira Ji, [Ahmed Faraz](#), Ustad [Amanat Ali Khan](#), Dr. Muhammad Baqir, [Intezar Hussain](#) and many others. The house became a birthplace of the influential literary movements. Many writers frequented it; debates, discussions, exchange flowed with tea, coffee and cigarette smoke making it a favourite haunt of Lahore youth with non-mainstream points of view. It built up a reputation of being a platform and meeting place for people of diverse backgrounds to voice their opinions in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

Perhaps for this reason or maybe because it was not economically viable since writers and artistes sit long and eat little, it was shut down by the owner in the eighties. But on 2 February 2012, on the orders of the Lahore Commissioner, Pak Tea House was put under the control of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and on 10 March 2013, it was formally reopened.

The furnishings are ordinary, the floor and crockery non-descript but it is the walls that hold one’s attention. The communists are there, and the progressives, the liberals, the dissenters, the half crazed and the loonies. From every vertical flat surface looks across a face one has known, loved, respected and idolized. One has to stop at every step creating a jam in the table crowded zigzagging room. But people smile and stop while you take your time recognizing and admiring the photographs. Only wish there were some women writers, artistes, painters too, but I guess one cannot have everything.

Saeeda Diep has a broad forehead, sharp, slightly long nose, and eyes that keep smiling even when the thin lips don't. She is a beautiful human being and I am glad there is a seat vacant beside her. For a few moments I do not wish to talk to her, only to look at her; she is someone I have known for a long time though I have met her only now. She tentatively reaches out her hand and I hold it in a tight grip. This is the feeling she must be giving to all the destitute women who call her and need her help, the minorities who find shelter in her warm embrace, the reason why people rally round her when she leads protest marches and why LGBTQs in their desperate need to talk to someone land up at her office late in the evening knowing that she would forgo dinner to hear them out.

We do not talk much; we do not need to. Having walked an unfriendly terrain all one's life one tends to recognize fellow travelers. She has brought a beautifully embroidered red Kurta piece for me; I have only some CDs of revolutionary songs and dissident speeches. But Diep is happy like a child with them. We want to spend more time with each other; I say I'll be back from Sindh in ten days, she says she has a spare room; and it is fixed. On my return from Karachi I shall be staying with her.

Neelam Ahmed Basheer is a beauty and she dresses to match her looks. Men are attracted to her like the proverbial moths to the flame, but she is no burning candle. She is an alive woman, a writer who knows her worth and a human being who is large hearted, loving, kind and frank. She had come a bit late, seen the crowded table, looked around and waving her hand at Unpublished asked him to get up so that she can sit close to me.

A funny thing then happens at Pak Tea House. Unpublished is asked where he is staying since he lives in Faisalabad. He says he is staying with a friend whose family is going through very troubled times and that he is often down in Lahore and stays with them to help. Neelam, to the point as usual asks "How are you helping them?"

This is an opportunity for Unpublished to showoff and he shoots "You know I am a Syed" There is the sound of a sharp gasp; obviously even in Pakistan it is not usual to wave the flag of one's superior birth. A part of my brain approves and files this while the rest gives its full attention to Unpublished. Pleased with the impact he has made he continues "There is genii in their family. I give amulets (Taveez) to them and bless them. They are safe for a while then the genii begins to disturb again, and I have to be sent for. It is a powerful genii but I shall be able to control it soon!"

I am aghast-----at myself! How did I land here with this fellow? I immediately understand the confused and doubtful look that I had noticed in Diep's eyes. She was surprised at his being my escort. What are the other writers most of them younger to me be thinking of me in this foolish man's company? I wish Aslam Khwaja had been close at hand for getting murdered.

Neelam is not only a popular short story writer published by leading publishers, she is a very interesting person sharing anecdotes and cracking jokes, but she is also bored easily. When she is bored she sings to entertain herself as she does now. She has a good voice that seems to have been trained in classical music.

I thank my stars for the presence of 'mad women' on this earth. What would I have done for survival without the crazy lot? The evening ends with all of us walking down Mall Road enjoying the nip in the air and the warmth in the discussion. My publisher Amjad Salim should have been part of the group but Abid Husain Abid, the General Secretary of Progressive Writers Association, Punjab had met him earlier in the day and worked out the plan for the launch of the book.

Unpublished comes to the guesthouse with me and I ask him for the plane ticket again. He says again that he has left it in his suitcase. I begin to walk back to the car saying we shall have to go and get it. It is then that he tells me that he would be accompanying me to Karachi and that both the tickets have been made together.

"No! You are not doing anything of the sort. Give me back my money and cancel my ticket." I am visibly angry now and Hawaldar Mohammad Bashir hearing my raised voice walks up from the gate where he had been waiting for me. Unpublished understands that he is outnumbered and says, "I do not have that much money with me now."

"Right, so we will go to the place where you are staying anyways. You can then give me the money and cancel the booking."

"I do not have that much cash." He has a ready answer.

"That makes it easier; we can just go to the nearest ATM."

"I do not have that much money in the bank. Look this has happened because I wanted to be with you and see you safely till Karachi. I'll cancel the ticket tonight and the money shall come to my account. I'll bring it to you first thing in the morning."

"I have other plans in the morning. I'll leave very early in the morning with a friend."

"You did not ask me."

Now I am really angry. I launch on a good scolding on the independence of women which he hears quietly; I tell him to leave the money with Hawaldar Mohammad Bashir tomorrow and he leaves with a bad grace. Next morning, I call to remind him and he does not pick up the phone. Must be a late riser I reassure myself dressing quickly in anticipation of seeing some portion of Lahore with Irfan and of collecting some facts and anecdotes of the Martial Law era from a comrade who suffered and had to take voluntary exile because of it.

CHAPTER THREE

Irfan is dot on time and we decide to walk to the Lahore museum which is about two kilometers away. The building of the museum takes my breath away. It is in red stone built in the style that can best be called Islamic Punjabi. The domes are there but sleeker with several smaller domes and minarets to balance the overall effect. It is imposing without being unfriendly. I have hardly got over the building

when I gasp at the price of the ticket. A whopping Rs 500 for foreigners. I need not have worried; Irfan with a straight face asks for two tickets and pays twenty Rupees, smiles and gestures me to follow him.

The old Lahore Museum was built in the 1860s in what used to be the Punjab Exhibition Hall. This old museum, along with the Punjab School of Arts which was later renamed the [Mayo College of Arts](#) was looked after by [John Lockwood Kipling](#) father of the renowned writer [Rudyard Kipling](#), who mentions the museum in his book [Kim](#). In 1894 the museum was shifted to the present building bang opposite the old campus of the [University of the Punjab](#), on the Mall Road.

Most interesting for me are the Gandhara Buddhist sculptures and the collection of Buddhist art from [Tibet](#) and Hill States of Pakistan. This museum is also famed for its collection of miniature paintings both from the [Mughal](#) period and the Pahari or the Chamba school. I am not very interested in Miniature paintings intricate work though they are. But this is the first time I got the opportunity of seeing the miniatures juxtaposed with contemporary paintings by some of Pakistan's most prominent artists such as [Ustad Allah Bux](#), [A.R. Chughtai](#), [Shakir Ali](#), [Sadequain](#), [Gulgee](#) and others. The movement from one to the other is visible, the influence marked. The distinct effort made to break away from a tradition that must become boring though overwhelming after a time forcing the artistes to set it aside and experiment with their own truth as they perceive, feel and approach it.

I stand so long staring at the Starving Buddha that Irfan decides to take a walk. I have often wondered at the ambivalence of image representation. Here is a man who gives up his crown, his palace, his comforts, his wife and son and even his food in search of wisdom and then there is the sculptor who carves this man in gold. So approachable is the enlightened one in his human form and in gold he is in one stroke turned into a god; distant, aloof, remote, alone and imprisoned. How misplaced can the devotion of a single man be? But why blame the sculptor? It must have been a rich devotee who could give so much of gold to honour his deity. He probably did not assign a starving Buddha. This must be the sculptor's choice to select the form most complex, a challenge to his art, a test of his skill; each rib marked, the skin hanging loose, eyes sunken, face shrunk and hideous; the search of wisdom that demands the sacrifice of beauty. Maybe the sculptor also saw his own self in the starving, struggling to survive Buddha.

There are two versions of when Buddha starved. One says that he did so after he attained enlightenment and the other that it was as he lay dying that Sujata reclaimed him to earth with a mouthful of milk and rice. It was when he came back to life that he realized that extremes are unacceptable to being and began preaching the middle path as the enlightened one; the one who had discovered death not as the ultimate end but as a stopover in the life cycle. As an atheist I prefer the second version but the first one remains to maintain diversity so necessary for existence.

Irfan appears and says we have been in the museum for four hours. It seems like four minutes but there is a soft sound of a rumble which I realize is my stomach complaining. "Let us find a good place for *nihari* and *roti*," he suggests, and we come out enjoying the sun. He asks about my interest in Buddhism and I try explaining to him that it is 'Buddha's way' that I am interested in. He begins to have doubts over my atheism. I am often faced with this difficulty of trying to convince people that Buddha's way and later

it's development into a doctrine is the best method to understand how the teachings of a non-believer can be turned into a belief that moves on to becoming a religion. The *nihari* is excellent, hot, spicy and tender. Just as we are eating a young couple walks in and sits on a table nearby. "This is something new; we could not think of doing this in my youth." Irfan observes a bit wistfully.

Yes, things change even from one day to the other. Irfan calls Amjad Minhas my publisher and tells him where we are. Amjad asks us to step over to the outlet of his books and we decide to walk it, another two kilometres through the Anarkali from the place where we are eating. And now I really see Anarkali Bazaar walking by the grave of Qutub ud din Aibek, who had died after a fall from a horse but was the rightful founder of the Delhi Sultanate. The monument is ordinary and badly maintained. On the left is the monument that is supposed to house the grave of Anarkali, the dancer of the Moghul Emperor Akbar's Court and Saleem the crown prince is said to have fallen in love with her leading to her being sentenced to death and buried alive. Anarkali's sepulcher is said to be one of the most significant Mughal buildings of the period. The tomb is now part of the compound of Punjab Secretariat and right before it is the Chief Secretary's Office. Since the tomb is utilized as the Punjab Archives, access to the building is restricted. It is open to public for only about two hours in the morning and we had missed that time. Not an emperor's wife, nor a queen in her own right, her tomb has been claimed for more useful work and as always time has wiped out the traces of love. But it is the presence of this grave that gives a name to the area and market around. I wonder if the courtesans of Heera Mandi ever visit her grave to pay their respects to one of the finest pearls their tribe has produced? Or do they shun it to avoid the ill omen of the same fate befalling them?

Amjad and Irfan are old friends from the times when the youth was an important part of, often leading the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy. They share the bonding formed between the like-minded in a united struggle. Irfan says that he comes almost every year to meet his mother, but I have a feeling that he is here also to meet his old comrades, to talk of the struggles lived, to revive the memories of friends lost and to reassure himself that he is alive. Amjad and Irfan include me in their friendship with the ease known only to comrades. We joke and laugh with each other and at each other over fried fish. Punjabis cannot sit and talk without food and this fish is exceptionally well done. A Christian couple walks in. They are Amjad's friends and he goes out of his way to make them at home. More fried fish, tea and *andarsa* is called for just for them. The warmth of the secular trying to heal the wounds of the minority! I have seen it happening ever so often in India; the majority community trying to reassure the minorities that they belong. That is how all of us show the world that we are, and we shall be.

I find that I quite like Amjad Minhas despite his having published one of my books without asking me and for delaying the publication of the second one by almost a year.

She is standing right there, flipping through some books. There is a sadness in her eyes as she smiles and nods. I know she is smiling because I have reached the conclusion predicted by her; perceptions change in a minute. And it is good that they do otherwise how would one continue to survive with an opinion one had formed of a fellow being. People change, their expectations evolve and so does the means of realizing them. It is only natural that we understand the changes and accept them. But why is she sad? Is

it because I have not called out to her ever since I have been in Pakistan? I should have; I regret and look back at her in regret; she is no longer there or anywhere. But it was a solace to see her.

I have called Hawaldar Mohammad Basheer thrice and he has no news for me. Unpublished has not shown up. I am a little bit worried by now. But nothing can put me down because Amjad has just shown me my new book 'Ret Par Khoon' a collection of my short stories. Amjad is sharp. He doesn't know the reason but saw that I was worried; he kept me entertained till he could and when he saw that I was panicking brought out the book to make me happy. The book is well-done and I am pleased. He had done a wonderful job of 'Mere Hisse Ki Roshnai' too, much better than the Indian edition.

We take an auto rickshaw till Lawrence Garden which is now called Bagh-e-Jinnah, a historical park of Lahore. The 150 acres of green is a garden where a lot of history has taken place. For decades, it has been the venue for the All [Pakistan](#) Music Conference, held in the crisp spring air and the chill of early winter. Roshan Ara Begum would be the star performer here and her rich voice and the ambience must have made the place surreal. Some very important plays also were performed in the open-air theatre situated on a manmade hill which is supposed to have been a brick kiln from the Moghal era, covered up by the British. But my interest here is different. It is here that the first conference of the Progressive Writers Association of Pakistan was held in 1949. I have tried but not been able to find out if Abba was present at the conference. Those were his underground days and even if he had been present it must have been under cover. The huge green space houses a botanical garden, a mosque known as Masjid Dar-ul-Islam, and the Quaid-e-Azam Library which is situated in a beautiful white Victorian building. The garden is owned and maintained by the Pakistan Cricket Board.

It is the right time and the garden is in full bloom. A little further down the road towards Lawrence Hall, the library there is a gnarled old Camphor tree whose fallen leaves give out a pleasant camphor odour when crushed. Another oddity is the 'Buddha tree' with large thorns protruding from its trunk and branches. Why is such a vicious looking tree named the Buddha tree? Maybe because of the hardships that Buddha is said to have subjected his body to. It would certainly be death if one was to try climbing this tree.

We sit down in the sun at the cafeteria and order tea. The garden is a riot of colours with seasonal flowers competing with the perennial roses. I call Mohammad Basheer again. Unpublished is still not answering his phone. The lady who owned the place where he was staying had presented me a woman's magazine that she publishes. It is still in my bag. I open it and dial the number that is given on the first page. She picks up herself, greets me and on inquiry tells me that Unpublished has left for Faisalabad. I am without a ticket, eight thousand rupees short and I have the booking only till tomorrow at the guest house. I can get my dollars changed tomorrow but will I get a seat on the two flights that operate between Lahore to Karachi? I am discussing this with Irfan when I suddenly stop and beat my head. "What?" inquires Irfan, quite sure that I have given away all my dollars to Unpublished.

"I left the embroidered kurta that Diep had gifted me in the car. That too is gone."

"Look, I know the loss of a beautiful dress is most hurting to any woman, but to make up for it there is nothing like dinner at Cuko's Den?"

“Who is Cuko and where is his den?”

“You shall have to visit the place, eat there and then know.”

I am still worried when he gets up, picks up my bag and says “Come, it isn’t walkable, we’ll reach there soon to get a table with a view of the Lahore Fort.”

It is an old Haveli, owned by Iqbal Hussain who was born in Hira Mandi, a son of one of the women whose melodies wafted making the lanes come alive; he grew up with music, rhythm and poetry mingling in his ears but strangely it was painting which attracted him. Most of his work is about Hira Mandi and its women in their ‘down-time.’ Today Iqbal Hussain is a famous painter known for his ‘un-glamorous’ portrayals of modern, impoverished, popular, getting old courtesans of Heera Mandi. Irfan gives me all this information as we climb the eight flights of zig zagging wooden staircases with beautifully carved bannisters. The walls around also serve as part of Iqbal Hussain’s private gallery, showcasing his paintings of women looking down, making faces, changing, dressing and turning away uninterested. It is a strange feeling, of invading into a space that is public but begs for some privacy.

We manage to get a table right at the balcony; the Urdu word for balcony is ‘jharokha’ and is much more romantic. But there is freezing wind blowing and I am chilled to the bone in a few seconds reminding me of Manto’s description of Lahore’s winter. Before I can complain, a gas heater is brought and placed nearby. The area warms up in a jiffy. Outside is the side view of Lahore Fort with its big stretch of green. “We used to play there as children” Irfan informs me that his house is close by and the land out laying the fort was their playground. Now it has a barbed wire fencing surrounding it and a portion of the fort is occupied by the army.

The Delhi Red Fort also had army occupancy, a handover from the British time, with an ugly four storey army barracks marring the beauty of the Mughal architecture. I wonder what had been decided about it now that the Indian army had vacated the building and the Red Fort. “The state protects these monuments, but the younger generation does not feel these places belong to them. They have never played in its shade, hidden in its nooks playing hide and seek, tried to count its minarets.” As the dark approaches different coloured lights are focused on the Fort transforming it into an ethereal structure.

I must talk to her and ask her opinion on what is more important, making these monuments out of bounds for the common people and thus preserving them for a few centuries or allowing children to play near them and giving them the feeling that they own the place, that it is part of their tradition and inculcating in them a sense of responsibility for protecting historical sites for posterity.

Kababs, kulcha and korma later my worry returns. Irfan senses it, brings out his mobile and calls. Soon he is in an animated conversation in Punjabi with Diep. I had been too embarrassed to call her. Diep who is used to handling distress begins with the basics. Do I have a place to stay at night? She asks me to come over to her office the next day and promises to arrange for the money exchange both of dollars and Indian rupees. I heave a sigh and silently thank my son who had persuaded me to travel with at least fifteen thousand extra rupees.

The smirk is audible; I look up suspiciously at Irfan and find him busy with the last bit of meat on the bone. She is sitting on the table at the far end of the jharokha, waves and getting up languidly passes by muttering "remember you had then called him a rich man's spoilt brat who has no sense of fun in traveling around without money."

"Well I had no clue this would happen."

"Nor he; and his advice was given because he cared for you. Learn to appreciate people's thoughtfulness and not put them down even though they are your own children."

"I'll do that if you promise to travel with me to Karachi."

"What was that you said?" inquires Irfan still busy with the bone.

"Nothing, just that it would not be this cold in Karachi."

CHAPTER FOUR

Early next morning I call up Aslam. He stops me from trying my luck in getting a seat on one of the flights and says he can arrange it from Karachi. In half an hour he calls back with the details and everything is under control. Thank goodness for friends and comrades, people like Unpublished are never going to succeed with whatever perverted plans they had.

Karachi airport is bustling with activity. It is the busiest in Pakistan and I see Aslam's head above the others in the visitor's enclosure. Aslam turns to me but before he can say anything I say 'raat gayi baat gayi' and we both burst out laughing. People turn to stare at the tall man laughing smoke at a sari clad woman who joins him. Aslam has a cigarette in his hand as usual. The place where I am to stay is an NGO named SPO. NGOs in Pakistan seem to be doing very well for themselves. This one is in the centre of the city very near the 'Do Talvar', is a two floor structure, has several comfortable rooms for guests and its offices on two floors.

The election symbol of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the Prime Minister of Pakistan from 1972-77 and the founder of the People's Party of Pakistan was a sword. For those who do not know Zulfiqar was the name of Hazrat Ali's sword. When in power, Bhutto had had swords sculptured at squares, embossed over building and painted wherever he could. It is also possible that people out of love had done so without any instructions. This was a well thought out decision, because the following regimes could no way bring these sculptures down since sword is a symbol of Islam and power and not an individual. The square had two swords and further down on the same road was a bigger square with three swords named unimaginatively 'Teen Talwar.' I am the guest of Ellaheen Baloch, a Jadgali speaking Baloch of Liyari, Karachi. He was the Karachi office bearer of Democratic Students' Federation (student wing of CPP) during 1980s and now works for a NGO Strengthening Participatory Organization (SPO) and is its head for the southern Sindh districts.

He takes me and Aslam for a drive by the sea. The mangroves are beginning to darken, the sea is still, and the sun gone for its evening bath. Aslam had bought some vodka on the way and disposable glasses are available in most of the cars in Pakistan. Quite a few women do not allow alcohol in the house so men in Pakistan have to resort to drinking in these make shift arrangements. It is a nice place to talk, exchange ideas and get to know each other. Ellaheen Baloch is a leftist but not a member of any party. Suddenly out of the blue he asks me 'Why don't you give us a party line comrade? We would then be able to function unitedly on that.'

'Every country shall find its own process to struggle for the annihilation of class and have its own revolution.' I have always believed in this; I have also witnessed the resentment within the communist parties because of the big brotherly attitude of the socialist states. Com Vardhan was also asked something similar during his visit to Pakistan and he had refused point blank saying that any party line or policy brought in from outside would be an imposition. I wonder why comrades of Pakistan do not wish to do their own thinking and arrive at their own plan of action. How can someone from another country understand the needs and requirements that a left wing party has to build upon? Is it a hangover from the days when Sajjad Zaheer had to be brought from India to lead the Communist Party of Pakistan; so even today leftists expect some outward force to guide them and keep tabs on the way they perform? Or maybe this is just a manner of escapism. As Comrade Tahira Ali had said- it is the NGO's who in the eighties hijacked the atmosphere of change which would have in all probability brought about a major upheaval; if not a revolution at least it would have wrested power from the feudal lords and loosened the grip of the Mullahs. The NGO's changed the equation and made the entire struggle project based; angling for funds, doing some good work while the funding lasted and then moving on to another issue that had more money. Maybe Ellahi Baksh Baloch was feeling a bit embarrassed at the role NGOs have played and wanted to make amends.

Whatever it was I refused to get into the rigmarole. We ate at a very nice place where the best thing was the 'kulfi.' Karachi is pleasant like Bangalore in winter and one can enjoy both kulfi and hot halwa. For a foodie like me Pakistan is turning out to be a devil's table.

The following day Aslam has arranged a meeting at Pakistan Medical Association Auditorium. I am surprised at the turn out. The hall is full, with some people standing at the back and some sitting on the carpeted floor right before the dais. Then I learn of the active role that the medical fraternity had played in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy. Not only had the doctors and medical students been at the forefront of the protests and demonstrations, they took it upon themselves to provide immediate medical help to people injured in baton-charge, demonstrators with bullet injuries and prisoners being released after third degree torture. It is humbling to be in the presence of so much commitment. There are so many leftists and progressives in all walks of life; people are constantly making jokes about fundamentalists, airing their liberal views, writing poetry that exposes their hypocrisy; all these committed people would be such a challenge to the reactionary forces if only they were united. That is why the rightists apply all their energies in disintegrating any effort for left unity. Even Hitler first did away with the communists before cracking down on the Jews.

I meet Hoori for a few minutes. She is the daughter of Com. Malik Noorani who established the Maktaba-i-Daniyal that became one of the important publishers of leftist literature in Pakistan. Hoori runs it now. She is also a classical dancer, then Zahida Hina arrives full of love that she tries to cover with abuses and snide remarks. Zaheda Baji is from Bihar, but she openly condemns the cocoon other Indian migrants have built around themselves. She is a staunch feminist, has failing eyesight and a severe back problem but can be found in every meeting, demonstration or protest aimed at bringing peace and unity within the communities of Pakistan.

And there are so many more, but the one who really arouses my curiosity and makes me wish I had more time to spend with him is Dr. Sher Shah. He is virtually the host because he has arranged for this auditorium, but he has to leave early. "Well I might have better luck next time" I say wistfully. He smiles, a warm slightly naughty smile "You could stop by one of these days at my hospital and I can show you around." I grab the opportunity and he in turn looks surprised. Maybe he wasn't expecting me to accept. We laugh; me at his surprise, he in disbelief. But I really want to visit this hospital where a highly qualified gynecologist has built a hospital to save women dying during childbirth.

I give a talk on Indian political situation, an hour of questions follows and I get a feel of talking to a very intelligent, highly sensitive crowd, knowledgeable of its neighbor, unswayed by the state machinery's rhetoric, warm and generous to the daughter of the CPP founding General Secretary. Towards the end comes the question I had been hoping would not come. "Why are Muslim girls becoming so helpless as to have to marry Hindu boys." I smile, admit that I am not qualified to answer this question since I too married a man who was a Hindu before he became a Marxist. But the issue is not about helplessness rather it is about women learning to exercise their choice. Men have to accept that patriarchy is on its last legs and the world is moving towards gender equality. There is a loud hum of approval from the audience. So, men in Pakistan have begun accepting that women have to move towards equality. Good work neighbor!

There is tea outside the hall. Strange as it may seem tea in every leftist gathering tastes the same all over the world; extra sweet, mildly bitter, tepid and served in flimsy disposable glasses. It makes me feel at home as I meet G.M. Baloch and Hasan Mansoor for the first time. They are part of Aslam's group. I do not realize then, but we would soon be the Three Musketeers with me making the fourth who was the 'always in trouble' one.

It is an odd feeling. I have known about these people, their work and commitment, I speak their language, resonate their emotions and desires, empathize with their yearning for the progressive ideology; yet I am a foreigner, whose visa carries a time limit, with each passing day eating into the duration of my stay.

"So, make the most of the time in hand."

"Does one ever?" I question her without turning.

"Perhaps not, but one can keep trying". I know that she wishes to console but it makes me angry.

“Why should one always keep trying? And how many things should one keep trying?”

“Well it is difficult to change without making the effort. And issues that seem unchangeable and static also absorb the effort towards change; so invisible as they may be change is happening”

“Next you shall tell me to have faith in evolution and give up on revolution.”

“Revolution becomes sustainable by investing in evolution. A massive upheaval changes the movement of the economy, might bring about social equality but will it change the way people believe in possession, in hoarding, in saving?”

“But then is the borderless world of Karl Marx a possibility? Is the Panchsheel of Buddhism workable? Can humanity exist without coveting? Can differences ever be celebrated and plurality lived and admired?”

“Then peace would no longer be desired; it would be a part of life.” She is almost as wistful as me.

“Yes. And death would be a part of life and not a result of wars.” I agree and expand what she has said but have nothing to offer by way of consolation to her.

Aslam asks me to turn around and right behind me are Ayesha and Harris Gazdar. They are just back from a meeting held to condole the death of Parveen Rehman. Brutally murdered for raising her voice against land mafia and for standing up for the rights of the slum dwellers Parveen’s death had shaken the consciousness of Karachi. Ayesha and Harris had decided to attend the meeting and so were not able to come for the discussion. I too would have liked to be there and pay my respects to a very brave, forthright and honest woman. Harris and Ayesha take me and Aslam to their house and we have a leisurely dinner cooked by their wonderful house help Jumna.

His curly, lush black hair has straightened and thinned; he also wears them much shorter now; his thin frame then covered in loose shirt and mismatched trousers, his shy laughter is replaced with a slow, almost reluctant smile, the jhola that hung from one shoulder is gone, if he looked like a young, ardent vanguard, uncaring of his looks and dress, he now appears to be a Sufi delving into the heart of life and unearthing its lost essence, but his eyes are the same. Shining through now thicker glasses, warm, kind, welcoming like a friend, appreciative like a comrade. Thirty-six years is a long time and confinement by a repressive regime can take its toll; subdue and change the course of the most ardent spirit.

I had met Badar Abro in Havana, Cuba. Both of us were members of the delegations of our countries, in Havana to participate in the first International Youth Festival, joining the crowd cheering Fidel Castro, Yasser Arafat, singing off-note the songs of revolution, dancing holding hands of comrades from Latin America, Africa, hugging friends from the Soviet bloc, wiping tears at the martyrdom of Che Guevara and Salvador Allende, chanting “Viva la Revolution!” To be twenty and rejoice on the streets of a country which had shown that contesting the power of the strongest is imaginable; to know that the young in the western world were singing “Imagine.” Ah Youth! When line of poems ‘we shall fight and never lose’ seem a reality!

Badar's father, Jamal Abro, a well-known Sindhi writer had been a liberal, progressive who had met my father in a writer's conference in Almaty in the then USSR. We met and became friends in Havana and laughed at the continuity of friendship through conferences and festivals. Over breakfast we discussed the regimented sight-seeing, attendance in discussions and boring panels and six of us boarded the public transport and walked the lanes and alleys of old Havana.

In 1980 came the information that Badar was in jail; I was an independent woman by then, working for a progressive, left of the centre newspaper. I had celebrated his commitment to his cause and sent him a stone Ganesha, a symbol of initiation in Indian Mythology. In prison Badar was writing short stories, articles and plays. One of the plays was produced and performed inside the jail. Work, organization and commitment, the mark of a comrade! Then I heard that he had been released and was not keeping well.

I meet him in his house, learn of the restoration work that he is doing in ancient sites of Sindh, receive the beautiful book he has written on the forts of Sindh and he broaches the subject of so many inscriptions on stone that have yet not been deciphered. I offer help with Kharoshthi, Takan and Devanagiri. We are deep in conversation when Badar realizes that his wife and son are feeling left out. Dinner is announced and there is chicken cooked in garlic greens, pungent, tender and hot. Badar's wife is sweet and quietly understanding of both of us wishing to discuss myths, history and Marxism. Badar is all excited when I tell him about my forthcoming visit to Bhit Shah and tells me the pattern developed in the rendition to keep his verse and its real meaning hidden, since most of it is, rebellious, questioning and voices dissent. Both Badar and his wife wish to visit India and most of all see Rajasthan.

On way to the meet organized by the Progressive Writer's Association, Pakistan, I ask Aslam why Badar has an air of loneliness around him. It seems Badar, once he recovered had systematically withdrawn himself from the left, from all kinds of movements. I have seen Naxals give up on the 'revolution' when they were released after long prison sentences. It is partly the state that psychologically works on the detainee and partly it is the let down and opportunism of one's comrades that leads to this frustration and withdrawal. Never have I found such comrades happy in their self-imposed alienation.

The meeting has been organized by Iqbal Ali Alavi sahib and Raahat bhai and other people from the PWA are also present. It is a lively discussion on the challenges before the progressive writer's movements. Then in walks Karamat Ali sahib and I cannot help myself; even though he shakes his head trying to stop me, I inform the audience that I am here only because of his efforts, that he managed both the Indian High Commission as well as the Pakistan External Affairs ministry to get me a non-reporting visa for six cities in Pakistan. It must be explained here that getting a visa for Pakistan and for India is a problem for citizens of both the countries. It is for specific cities and not the entire country and then not more than three cities in one visit; then there is the reporting and non-reporting Visa; the reporting one obliges you to report to the police headquarters every 48 hours, if you change cities you report again and then again when you are to leave finally. So, I was privileged to have a visa for 6 cities and a non-reporting one all because of Karamat bhai. How could I not make such kindness public? Karamat Bhai blushes and accepts the applause. The discussion continues as I warm up to the issue of Kashmir, the disintegration within the Left and the question of preserving the Muslim Personal Law. My thirst for knowing the people of Pakistan is reciprocated by the audience' yearning for gaining information about India and its citizens.

CHAPTER FIVE

We have been on the road since early morning. Karachi the cosmopolitan is left behind; though part of Sindh, it is when one is 50 km away from Karachi that one gets the real feel of Sindh. But before that we stop in Malir, a suburb of Karachi. From the gates Dr. Sher Shah's Kohi Goth Women Hospital seems more like a sprawling rest house with construction alternating with patches of green. It is beautifully built to transmit a sense of peace to the patients; it bustles with activity but gives the impression of being slow paced and easy going. Dr. Sher Shah as a gynecologist treats more women than men. Perhaps he understands that for a woman the time for sickness is also her time for rest, she is sick, or her illness has aggravated because she has been denied leisure and peace.

Dr. Sher Shah as a leftist student worker, refused to serve in the Army after General Zia ordered that the doctors will be registered only after they have served in the army for two years. He left Pakistan, got a degree in Test Tube Babies from England but on coming back home realized the high rate of Fistula in women and trained for surgery and repair. His mother was one of first women to take a medical degree and this she did when her eldest son was also studying medicine. It was she who inspired all her children to become doctors. Dr. Shah is also a short story writer and has published several collections. It is his brain that executes his work but it his heart that perceives and leads him so the name of every collection of his has 'Dil' in it.

The sun is up; we stop at a kasba market, because I see some bananas and Aslam some pakoras. I am not to get down though I long to take a quick stroll in this market town. The bananas are a bit tasteless very obviously grown on excess chemical fertilizers but the pakoras are delightfully hot, crunchy and spicy. I feel sorry for people who do not enjoy street food.

We take a detour to spend some time in Makli, believed to be the biggest necropolis in the world. There are the awesome ones, obviously of kings and chieftains and there are the Sufi shrines, beautiful but humble and then there are the ones of ordinary citizens. Several important ones are under repair and entry is barred. Altogether occupying several hills, it is impossible to see Makli in a single visit. Our ancestors had better civic sense and did not occupy large tracts of land in the heart of big cities to construct samadhis and graves for their loved ones like we do now.

Most of the ordinary graves have no headstones. Maybe they never had headstones and believed in 'what's in a name?' but one can make out the graves of the women. They are carved with bangles, bracelets, ear rings and necklaces. Did the women centuries back enjoy such power as to be buried with the respect of marked graves? Were they teachers, Sufis, politicians or rich land owners?

The stone used to mark the graves is the yellow sand stone, the like of which has been used in Jaisalmer making it a city of gold rising from the golden sand. Monuments of Makli are neither imposing as the palaces of Jaisalmer nor are they overbearing like the huge structures built over the graves of the Mughal kings. Graves have been found in the excavation of ancient historical sites like the Mohenjo Daro. I stand on top of a hill and wonder if this burial site could have been in existence much before the

coming of the Muslims. I can see signs of pilfering of carved stone. Somewhat vaguely I recall having seen similar carved yellow sandstones, decorating the gardens and drawing rooms of rich households in the area called Defense in Karachi. Makli is huge, roads run through it on which ply auto rickshaws and private cars, several Sufi shrines inside it are functioning and it is impossible to keep checks. I wonder how long it would be for the city of Karachi to reach Makli and claim it as its own or for a twin city to develop here. I bend down to pick up a broken yellow stone as we walk back to the car

Back from the hills of the dead we are on our way to Keenjhar, a vast fresh water body, fed by several rivers. Hunger pangs are growing but Aslam Khwaja my guide wants me to have fish sitting by the lake it has been caught from. Sounds promising! We turn left and the car protest as it climbs a hillock and suddenly it is there-the expansive water mirror! My heart swells to occupy my whole being, urging the water to rush through my ears, nose, mouth, to swirl and caress my skin and finally swallow me.

The car stops, a soldier swaggers near; this is a rest house only for the army; we drive on and find that the next one is under renovation. I am desperate to reach the water and offer to forgo lunch, but the driver wouldn't hear of it. He is a Sindhi who take as much pride in their fish cuisine as the Bengalis. At last we reach one that belongs to the culture ministry, can serve fried fish and faces the lake.

There it lies opening its serene, dignified embrace- the strange water body that remains jade coloured even when the sky is a clear blue; the lake that has a mind of its own. There are several islands and on one lies buried my namesake-Noori, the fisherwoman; lithe and supple like the fish she handled, she was the wife of [Jam Tamachi](#), a [Samma](#) prince, ruler of Sindh. It is said that on the banks of Keenjhar, broken walls are still visible that mark the site of an old fishing village. A girl from the fisher tribe of Gandri, Noori attracted the attention of Jam Tamachi, who fell madly fell in love with her and made her his queen. I came to know about her and her simplicity in the writings of the great Sindhi Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai where she figures as one of the seven heroines in his treatise 'Rasalo.' She is the protagonist of the chapter 'Sur Kamod'. It is said that it was her last wish to rest within the lake and among the fishes she loved. There she lies. Noori, the humble one, the dome of her tomb visible through the haze, washed by the lake she loved, alive in the fish that search the depths of the jade coloured lake to explain the meaning of the universe.

The lake is too rough to have a meeting with Noori. It might get dark on our way back. I am not afraid of the dark nor of a watery grave; but I do not have a visa for Keenjhar. I can stop during the day but should not be found here after dark. I'll be back. A meeting with Noori might happen years from now, but shall definitely happen! I do not say 'good bye' to Keenjhar.

CHAPTER SIX

Next stop is Hyderabad [Sindh]. This is where Com Sajjad Zaheer and the 13 accused in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case had been brought from different jails of Pakistan in 1951. Away from the judicial court and public eye, the Tribunal for inquiry and verdict had been set up here. He stayed here in the Hyderabad Central Jail for two years before being transferred to Mach Jail, Balochistan.

Aslam Khwaja talks non-stop and Hyderabad is his home-town, so he has a lot to say; but he falls silent as we enter Hyderabad. Is he aware that I want the city to seep into my being? To touch my heart and reveal to me the feelings of a group of political prisoners, as they entered the city of trial 63 years ago? All the prisoners except one are dead. The politics they believed in, the desire for a socialist South Asia is a thing of the past, a revolution that would bring justice and equality for all is a bygone dream, the struggle waged, the sacrifices made have been forgotten; the city has given way to multi-storey buildings, by-passes and flyovers. Perhaps I come too late.

Settling down in the guest house of another NGO I change quickly. There is no time to rest and no need. I am to meet Sohail Sanghi one of the senior most journalists of Sindhi, a comrade who has been an activist since his student days and spent a long period of imprisonment during Zia ul Haq's Martial Law regime. Equally promising is the place where we are to meet. It is one of the writers, journalist haunts of Hyderabad. I love these shabby, crowded, bustling with political discussions, poetry and humour places. Most old cities have at least one such coffee or tea house, where tables speak and chairs question, where the waiters are addressed by their names with a 'bhai' added for respect and where news is not just discussed threadbare, it is also lived because legends rub shoulders with those aspiring to live up to their heroes. Sohail Sanghi is most cordial and warm. I present him my book 'Mere Hisse Ki Roshnai' but Aslam takes it away before he can open it. "We talk before you open the book." Apparently Sohail Sanghi is quite capable of getting so immersed in a book that he can forget about his guests and the rest. A few hours later he conducted a meeting with writers and journalists at the Hyderabad Press Club; he spoke in Sindhi but his welcoming warmth reaches me even though I do not understand the words.

The discussion is progressing very well till one young man gets up and remarks that all the problems of the world can be resolved if the correct interpretation of Islam is followed by the world. Aslam with his usual nonchalance gets up and shoots back "But my love, where shall you then put 'Jihad' and the resulting terrorism. Let us not forget that Islam in its very basics asks Muslims to kill non-believers." Really, is the man not afraid at all or is he on a death wish? Most people are smiling away; they seem quite used to this kind of 'head-ons'.

It is early night. The group is a mixture of comrades, some who had left politics for some years but have returned, some who have recently found the Left in politics and others who have always stayed on the fringe and always shall because they like the indefiniteness of indecision. We are spread out in Dr. Harish's flat. This is Sindh where Hindus continue to live, educate, trade; 'Sain' is used as a form of respect and 'Ada' for brother.

Tea, coffee, biscuits, kadhai chicken and roti appear and disappear as discussion runs its course, covering democracy in Pakistan, debacle of the left in Bengal and Kerala; Kashmir and Aam Aadmi Party. There is a Baloch in the group, Zafar Imam, a journalist. I wanted to discuss with him the continued victimization of the Baloch youth and their alienation from mainstream politics in Pakistan. Dr. Harish's wife, Priya is in the final year of MBBS. I would have loved to talk to her how the women of the minorities are managing in an Islamic state? Incidents like Bhoro Bheel, the folk singer, whose dead body was dug out of the grave and dragged on the roads on the command of a Maulana, the abduction and

forced conversion and subsequent marriage of Rinkle Kumari a Hindu girl are recent occurrences. The surface appears so calm and still that I check myself from casting a stone.

But there are other things I cannot resist doing. I take a cigarette and wait. No one gives me a light. Finally, I pick up the match box and pass it to Zafar Imam. He looks at me non-plussed. I nod and ask him to light my cigarette. His hand trembles and I look him in the eye and smile. It is nice to teach men a thing or two, especially men who think that they are being so broad minded by discussing politics with a woman.

I am outside Hyderabad Jail at the gate of the outer wall. Sentries, soldiers behind sand sacks, automatics pointing towards civilians; the works! High security because a group of terrorists have been shifted here! I wonder how many of them are terrorists? And how many whom the state labels terrorists in the hope of silencing the voice of dissent? How many of them would come out alive and resume normal lives and how many would come out battered and broken, ashamed of having compromised and given way under torture or angry with the movement that just does not have enough people to give cover or post detention support? Why do elected representatives continue to have a feudal mindset and form governments that are anti-people? Do people have a choice outside democracy?

We walk across the gate straight down and then Aslam asks me to cover my head with dupatta and as we walk back and cross the gate again glance inside through the dupatta. I follow his instruction. Nothing is visible except a long road which leads to an inner gate. Anyways I have lost interest in the jail. A jail in Pakistan is like any other prison anywhere else. What is important are the people who are prisoners here. And there is no way of meeting them.

Alys Faiz has written about the elaborate plans she made with her two daughters every time she had to visit Faiz Ahmed Faiz in jail. She has also written about the relatives of the poorer prisoners, cooking in the open, often waiting for days to see their loved ones. Faiz has written a poem on the death of his elder brother who had come to Hyderabad from Sialkot to meet him in jail and suffered a major heart attack waiting for the meeting to materialize. What Faiz saw was his brother's dead body. And what about Sajjad Zaheer? He did not belong, nor did he have any relatives here; so did no one come to visit him? Was he lonely, left out, sad when other prisoners had visitors; did he think of his wife working hard to bring up three daughters in his absence, did he know that most of his letters were censored with black ink so that almost none of the information or inquiries reached his wife and she took heart from the fact that the illegible letter was signed in his hand; meaning that he was still alive. Did he think of his daughters growing up without him? The youngest one was only a month when he had left; would she know him when he went back home, if he ever did. And most importantly did he feel rootless, a citizen of nowhere as news trickled inside the prison that rules for crossing the border were getting stricter every day? Did the news of the disintegration of Progressive Writers Association give him pain and make him more homesick than the news of his mother being grievously sick? Was that why he had decided to write 'Zikr-e-Hafiz'? Was it an effort to stop the mindless bludgeoning of the young, over enthusiastic progressives who were cutting off their roots from the aesthetics of the classical and the elegant lyricism of the traditional?

Questions surge burning black holes in my brain. Life gave me no time to ask these questions from Abba and now this vacuum in my past that has grown into a fear, against putting down roots; the reason why I do not like to stay long in one place, why I crave to move on. Questions jostle and push each other as I walk into the city and reach the civil hospital where Comrade Sajjad Zaheer had been hospitalized for typhoid. On way I see the Noor Mohammad High School where students had climbed the roof and rained stones on army men doing the rounds of the city as news of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's hanging spread.

It is a sunny morning under the umbrella of desolation. Then Aslam sees his favorite Rabri shop. I have not liked any of the sweets I have tasted till now. My taste buds have been nurtured on Lucknow delicacies like 'Malai Pan' and 'Katli Kalakand' and later I have fallen for the vast array of Bengali sweets, so I tentatively take half a spoonful. "I never realized Sindhi's could make such excellent Rabri" I roll the creamy pulp in my mouth. "We are Mohajirs" admits the halwai with a smile and quickly looks away. He is young, about forty, must have been his father who migrated to Pakistan. This one must have been born here and is still a 'mohajir.' How long does it take for a migrant to become a local? Do they ever? Does one have to be born in a region, a language, a culture to belong? Are these things not there for the taking and owning? How is one to prove that one belongs? Questions change their course as the halwai ladles and hands out solid looking Rabri in plastic dishes.

Burqaless or Hijabless women on the streets are not cultural shocks for me. I have moved around in the kasba and mufassil of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan; there is really no difference between there and here. But a couple of things give me a jolt. One is the Halwai of Pakistan. For me 'Halwai' is a podgy, bald man, with an oil dripping head and shining face, a sugar and ghee dipped smile, fat, gold ringed fingers and a paunch to announce that he is well fed. Here there is no difference between a Maulana and a Halwai; flowing beards, black in this case, thin, slight frame, fair complexion and a skull cap.

The other cultural shock is to find almonds, walnuts and peanuts being sold on the same pushcart. I ought to have been happy at this doing away of class at least as far as nuts are concerned but class is ingrained in us South Asians; almonds and walnuts are high class and should be sold packaged in closed shops, served to special guests and used to decorate festival sweets while peanuts are roadside titbits, always affordable, to be munched anytime without any fanfare.

In the evening I am to meet Comrade Jam Saqi. One of the most committed Marxists of South Asia, Pakistan has not been kind to Jam Saqi. When is the state ever nice to the people who demand that it change its ways? Jam Saqi has always been on the wrong side with the Pakistani state but the worst period was during the Zia ul Haq's regime. Every person with a voice was the target of state repression that had been given a free hand under Zia's Martial Law. Jam Saqi had been active in politics since his student days, joining the Communist Party and moving all over Sindh organizing the peasants and the workers, writing columns and hand outs and in short becoming a danger for the regime propagating chaos because anything organized could become a force that would challenge the might of the state.

Jam Saqi was arrested, jailed and tortured; not because the torture would reveal anything the state did not know since Jam Saqi's work had always been over-ground; he was tortured so that he could be silenced, injected with drugs that would numb parts of his body, beaten to break his spirit, he would be

released when the rulers felt that they had managed to subdue the revolutionary in him. Doctors who were part of the movement would rally round him, supporters would tell him how they needed him and he would recover because his body was young and the movement needed him. Soon he would be arrested again, and the cycle would be repeated.

Then the false news of his death in custody was announced to demoralize the left and it spread like wild fire. Such was its speed and so authentic had it been made out to be, that his wife and mother of his two children could not bear the loss. Before the party could reach out to her, friends surround her to give hope and solace she jumped into a nearby well. Jam Saqi in jail, Jam Saqi unwell, weak and battered was acceptable but a life without Jam Saqi was unthinkable for her.

It is an old, somewhat dilapidated house where Comrade Jam Saqi lives in a lower middle- class area of Hyderabad. He is reclining in an easy chair. Dr. Harish visits him regularly and is present. Comrade Jam Saqi has difficulty in standing up; all the drugs that had been pumped into him are now taking their toll and his nerves are giving way. He wears thick lens spectacles remanence of days and weeks spent facing the high-powered lights of torture chambers; through them he stares at me for a long while. Is he taking stock of me or is he waiting for a sign from me? I raise my right hand in a tight fist and say, "Lal Salaam Comrade."

His head is jerky and his hands shake all the time; his words overlap, stumble and stammer; the lower half of his body is fast moving towards paralysis. I am sitting before the man who has spent more than half of his life in Pakistan jails, who has named his eldest son 'Sajjad Zaheer', who cannot get up to greet me but raises his fist and says 'Surkh Salaam'. Meeting him is a humbling experience. He talks, informs, questions and analyzes, I listen, inquire and try to touch his commitment and solitude at the loss of the cause. I try to reassure him that it is not a lost cause. Or is it myself I am reassuring through him? He strokes the shawl I have draped on his shoulders and in return gifts me an 'Ajrak'. Then suddenly he laughs, and his guffaw resonates round the room. Everyone else looks at me in gratitude. They later explain that he has laughed like this after a long time. We hold hands; border, countries, language, nationalities are meaningless; we are united in our ideology.

He has married again, and his wife works in the health sector. Considerably younger than him, it is said that she just wished to look after him in his old age. They have an eight- year old daughter and the sons and daughters from his first wife dote on their stepmother. His second son Sarang is the split image of his father as I see from Comrade's old pictures hung on the walls. Sarang is a student, active in youth politics, clear headed and completely devoted to his Comrade father. He is the representative of the next generation preparing to continue the struggle.

A line by Faiz Ahmed Faiz floats in my mind "They say the war is over and done with!" Is it? Till equality achieved and justice gained, can the soldiers give up the battle, desert the front?

A sitting has been arranged at the Sindh Community Foundation. Javed Soz, the young man who runs this organization is the son of a senior progressive, liberal Sindhi poet Soz Halai and works for the assimilation of Sindhi art, culture and language. It is a brain storming and the surprise is the many questions on Marxism and the practice of Communism. Participants are workers and activists who have

been trying to approach preservation of culture and its development in a progressive, liberal, secular way. Though not a supporter of the development sector and foreign funded NGO's, one has to accept that secularism and pluralism is not a high priority of any government in South Asia. Cultural diversity and mutual coexistence is something that can be preserved only through the interventions of small groups and individuals.

Javed Soz has built a small complex, with a large hall. There are no modern amenities in the complex, the furniture is ordinary, but it is open to the entire community. Regular poetry sessions, discussions on women empowerment and rights of minorities are held here. It is good to see so many young people who wish to hear about the challenges before the Left in India. Interest in India is high and questions that follow the formal introduction range from the social structure, the education system, the minorities and most importantly the survival of democracy. And there are many women and girls in the audience. Punhal Sario was once a member of a Sindh based Marxist group in 1980s now works with the peasants. The most important issue before Sindhi farmers is that of irrigation. Rain water and its storage is scant and ancient canals of the Indus river and its distributaries and tributaries interlink the modern ones making the source river the most generous one in South Asia for the tiller. Now all that is under threat with the Kalabagh Dam. This is the right time to build a farmer's movement but again as in India there is absence of will in the political leadership to organize those who had once formed the backbone of economy in the Indian peninsula. Punhal Sario is one of the few who are trying.

Much as I would have liked to spend more time with these activists I have to rush to Hala, the ceramic pottery centre. I must buy a few good pieces for friends and see the expanse of colour, polish, design and variety. Two cars have been arranged; Punhal Sario, Javed Soz and a few others pile into the cars. I understand that they like me wish to continue the discussion after Hala.

Hala is amazing! The baked clay, the stone powder, the perfect designing, variety in colouring and glass finish that is said to have developed in Iran, travelled all over Central Asia passing through Samarkand and Bokhara, resting a while in Herat and reaching its zenith in Sindh. In Iran the tiles are blue to reach the sky, Samarkand includes shades of green and Bokhara has brown connecting sky with earth; but it is only in Sindh that one finds all the colours imaginable used in the pottery, tiles, vases, bed posts and even in epitaphs. Hala pottery is an ode to the Universe through its colours.

Comrade Manoj Kumar is taking me around. Born and still living in Hala he is a gold mine of information on Sindhi culture. He explains that life carries the essence of earth and in Sindh from the first perambulator for a baby to the epitaphs that mark the graves are made with clay. Then he adds "That is why we need to rethink life to change the earth." He has hit the nail on the head as only a committed leftist can do.

We are eight and we sit down to a quick dinner on a roadside eatery. Food in Pakistan is served by weight and not plates. Two kilograms of roast meat with roti is ordered. Dal, onions and pudina raita are never ordered; they are included in the servings. Javed Soz asks if I want bottled water. I laugh; if my stomach cannot digest Pakistani water then I am not really Indian! He nods happily. I do ask for a glass

and one appears for eight of us. Unhygienic by modern standards but creating a warmth that shall probably vanish from South Asia with my generation.

Food is excellent but on the spicier side and I can see the desire for something sweet on everyone's face. Fumbling in my bag I find the lump of flavored jiggery and pass it to a younger comrade who jumps up, picks up the rolling pin, bringing it down with a bang on the lump breaking it into a dozen pieces. As each picks a piece I tell them its story. It was given to me a month back, in Amritsar by a Comrade farmer after a discussion on the increase in farmer suicides in Punjab of India. I had kept it in my baggage as an afterthought, presented it to Diep who had insisted that I keep half and gift it to someone else. It is flavoured with ajwain, saunf, ilaichi and black pepper.

"That is why it is nice. It carries the love of so many people" says Punhal Sario picking up another piece. How many times I wonder has he slept on a haystack, fagged out after long meetings that had not yielded any result; how many times has he been on the run, taking shelter in houses where people had been unwilling to unite and work together but understood that protecting a comrade is important, because their lives depend on the movement he is trying to build. There are so many like him who live a simple life, appreciating the small joys, their only yearning is everyone share these joys. They are the Sufis and Darveshes of our times. I shake my head to come back to reality. I have a date with a Sufi of the bygone times.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A night at the Dargah of Shah Abdul Lateef Bhittai has been arranged. For the last three hundred years, every single night, verses by the greatest of Sindhi poet are sung. Space is quickly vacated for me right in the front, opposite the singers. Javed noticing that there is only a thin mat on the marble floor conjures up a thick, rough quilt which is spread on the floor. "Your shawl is thin, the night shall get colder" Javed points out. I open my large shoulder bag and show him the thick shawl inside. "You are well prepared"; Punhal Sario says and smiles "It is normal to be prepared in activism" I remind him and smile back.

Aslam has arranged that I be here on a Thursday when the best Raagi sings the Raag. It is also a day when the maximum number of visitors come with their relatives suspected of being possessed by spirits and genii. Right before the musicians, is an open space where three or four women are beating their head on the floor, rolling and salivating. Aslam assures me that this would be over soon and then the real Raag would begin.

I am not worried about the time when it would end or whether it would end at all. I am concerned about why it is happening? Has no one ever tried to find out? This is obviously the lack of attention, the neglect, the loneliness, the rejection that has brought the women to this state; or maybe they just want to dance and roll around, something that might be tolerated from women under the influence of a spirit, but which shall lead to beatings, talaq etc. in 'normal' human beings. All the while they are rolling around the attendants of the shrine are keeping a careful watch. The moment their clothes show a little extra skin he gestures to the relatives and they pull their shirts down and straighten their salwars. I

remember the mad Baul at the Jaidev Utsav at Bolpur, Bengal. Everyone took care of her, allowed her to sing loudly and off tune, praised her to keep her quiet, but if her sari slid up her shins everyone shouted and screamed “Kapor theek kor! Kapor theek kor!” and her relatives ran to cover her up, cajoling, scolding and often slapping her when she resisted. For women even madness comes with restrictions; maybe the process of curing them is just a means to make them accepting of the restrictions that society puts on the sane women.

Two hours later the women have been given the sacred black thread by the chief Raagi and taken away. Now the night begins and music, poetry, rhythm, symbols merge with one another as the mist swirls round the huge veranda. There are some open fires around and people get up to warm their hands and faces returning quickly to not miss the music. It is a night of enchantment. Shah Lateef was the first poet to choose women as his protagonists, a direct challenge to patriarchy. At 3 a.m. the music ends and everyone gets up to pray. A man standing by Aslam asks him to put his hands up to pray. Aslam refuses; the man insists but before an argument can begin the Chief Raagi looks at the man angrily and waves his hand in the negative. So, this really is a place where one can have one’s own beliefs and follow them. As the crowd begins to disperse I walk up, place two hundred rupees before the Chief Raagi in appreciation of his music and walk away; one of the younger musicians follows me because the Chief Raagi has sent me a piece of black thread; I turn to look back and meet the Chief Raagi’s eye. He nods and acknowledges that I am a non-believer; I accept the black thread; we understand each other.

A couple of hours of sleep and I find myself walking back to the Dargah at the crack of dawn. The shrine is just coming to life, smoke emerges from the various shops; daylight endows a different beauty to the turquoise, prussian and sky blue tiles. In the central courtyard a man plays a drum and a woman is dancing in abandon. Shah Abdul Lateef Bhittai, who shunned the nightingale, the rose and other Persian symbols and wrote about the sparrow, the hard-working peasant and the wives of Hindu traders seeing off their husbands, praying for their safe return. I pause near the pond outside, in which Shah Lateef is said to have thrown away his collection of poetry, ‘Rasalo’; the water refused to drown it. The book floated till a disciple of Shah Lateef retrieved it. As always there is another version: Shah Lateef had thrown his manuscript in the pond but requests by followers persuaded him to write it again and this time disciples and students made several copies during the night of whatever he wrote in the day- just in case he was tempted to drown it, burn it or tear it up again. I prefer the first one of the water body taking a decision in favour of humanity and refusing to drown it.

In the water I see her reflection smiling at me. I continue to look willing my gaze to hold her there. She speaks, “And of course the water does not smear, blot and wash out the ink either?”

“Do not be so unimaginative. I have a right to be romantic.”

“You seem to be going overboard with it even though I accept that reality can be rather bland.”

“From the Leftist point of view the second is quite interesting as well; common folk getting together to force the powerful to accede to their demand. That is what unity and empowerment is all about.”

“There is life besides politics.” She says seriously.

“Not for me. Everything personal is political for me and vice versa. I cannot think of life without a voice of dissent; and I cannot think of dissent without there being analysis that would make dissent acceptable to an ever-increasing number of people.”

“In nine years you have matured.”

“Is that a polite way of saying that in nine years I have grown old?”

“No, maturity does not come with age, it comes with travel.” She says it rather wistfully. Is she unhappy at being tied to a place, region, country? “You may be right!” I accept. “It is hard to imagine Shah Lateef writing about the seafarers without having stood on the harbour and docks of Porbandar. But even I have not been able to travel.” “Responsibilities of home?” she asks.

“Actually I would have been quite happy to manage the house and let my husband travel, but he was not interested.”

“So why didn’t he manage the house and children and let you travel?”

“My dear if men had been so considerate about a woman’s desires, we would not have been fighting patriarchy for centuries.”

“I would suggest yoga and a drastic change in lifestyle.” She has an impish grin on her face.

“Why?” I am not amused. I love food and hate meaningless exercise.

“Now that you have the time, you should always be on the move and one must be fit to travel. Imagine falling sick while traveling alone.”

“How is it going to be different than falling sick at home?”

She is quiet for a while. Has she just realized that my children have moved away, and I now live alone? Then she says brightly “But you will miss all the lovely places that you could see.” I smile at her effort, pat her back. She seems much younger now. Have nine years changed me so much?

We must return to Hyderabad by noon. A meeting is scheduled with activists who run a regular study circle and read Shah Lateef to propagate the teachings of Marx. The very concept of such a study circle sounds promising. I am eager to be there.

There is a good crowd in a medium sized room in a flat owned by Bakhshal Thalo and his wife. Furniture has been removed to make more space and sitting arrangement is on the floor. The crowd is almost half Baloch and I learn for the first time that in Balochistan even women shake hands and not only among themselves, with men too. I am intrigued. There are so many questions but slowly the wide circle of queries zeros down to the mistakes that the left has made all over the world with the centre being the follies committed in India. This is no analysis; not even of how those mistakes have affected the left in Pakistan. Slowly I begin to realize that the whole meet is an exercise for showing me down. I try to do a two-way thinking, thinking up answers to their questions and trying to figure out logically if this has

been thought out and planned or is it extempore. I try to understand why they are so angry with me? Do they club me with the leftists here who have all taken the easy way out? Even Sohail Sangi is on a war path. All the while this is going on Aslam maintains a silence, he neither joins the attackers nor does he come to my defense. Then there comes the stage where I have to make the choice: do I fight it out or do I concede defeat. Sohail Sanghi has asked me to explain the Aam Aadmi Party's phenomenal rise. I am trying to explain the economic and political conditions when he cuts me short and asks if the Communists in India have tried to have an alliance with AAP. I smile and tell him that AAP has no political ideology, if they like they can come and join us themselves. "Aap bade hain ya wo?" [Are you bigger or they?]. He replies quickly meaning that being bigger the communist parties should be magnanimous. I get my taste of the patriarchal left that exists all over Asia; no place safe from patriarchal hierarchies in South Asia. These are our historical shackles and we have not yet got down to giving them up. Buddha comes to my rescue and I choose the middle path of neither a head on collision or one of backing off; I use the time-tested escape and ask the men around to tell me about their work. Where is the man who does not like to talk of himself? Bakshal, Sanghi and a couple of others embark on long soliloquies and I switch off till dinner is served.

I decide to walk back to the guest house and Aslam accompanies me. Hyderabad is silent and dark; I know the night is watching me. I had only a couple of hours of sleep last night but am hardly tired. Fatigued by the tossing and turning I come out of the room on the large balcony. The moon has just risen, and I watch as it yawns and stretches trying to get into a likable shape.

I ponder on what it was that was making them so rude? Is it something I have done or are they angry with Abba? If the second is true, then for what? For not becoming a martyr? Every movement needs a martyr to be used as a launch pad and that is why parties often make plans that make the martyrdom of a few comrades a possibility. But Abba not only lived he also left; so as far as the left movement in Pakistan is concerned he is a failure and quite useless to them. But he is the Founding General Secretary of CPP so they cannot deny the fact. I hang my head to allow the moon full access to my brain; I enjoy the moonlight as only the mad can. Suddenly something cuts off the moonlight; I look up expecting a cloud and that is where she is sitting on the parapet as if waiting for me.

"For you they are not the important ones. For you it is Comrade Jam Saqi who matters. You met him and he liked you."

"It is not a question of anyone liking or disliking me; I just wonder at where they hope to reach with so much anger and how shall joint fronts be formed which would be a plausible threat to the Capitalists? If that is not the aim, then to what end are people studying and imbibing Marxism?"

"Maybe for self-improvement and analysis."

"Then it is more a religion and not a process for change"

"Well Marxism is fast becoming a dogma"

“There is always that problem with the written word but there have always been comrades like Rosa Luxemburg who were re-evaluating and re-analyzing all that was written and weighing it against what was happening on the ground level.”

“Maybe that is the problem; not enough ground level work and a lot of branding and rejecting on the basis of theoretical gab.”

I laugh out loud and the security guard, half asleep at the gate jumps and looks up. Satisfied that I am alone he goes back to sleep mumbling something that sounds very much like ‘old crazy women.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Talpur kings surround me; six huge monuments of the rulers of the dynasty and several smaller ones of princes. I am thinking of Comrade Mir Mohammad Talpur one of the younger comrades arrested with Sajjad Zaheer. “No, I am not a feudal lord. I am a comrade” he had asserted when I had joked about his name and connection to the monarchs. “The Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case was a conspiracy hatched by the government to disintegrate the Communist Party and ideology in Pakistan. The few army officers arrested were a mere eye wash for the witch hunt that followed; even village level liberals and progressives were rounded up and tortured and kept in prisons without any charges being framed. The exercise had been conducted on the directions and participation of United States that was worried over a large section of the world turning socialist after World War II and jittery over the popularity of Marxism in the Muslim world.”

I do not know if his analysis is correct, but I wish Talpur Chacha of white mustaches, black hair, sharp eyes and a bullet lodged near the spine, was here with me at this moment. He was leading a protest march in the early eighties and had turned his back just in time as the firing began. The bullet was embedded in the spine, too dangerous to be meddled with surgery. In 1986, he was with me in Delhi. My eyes had filled with tears as he had lifted up his shirt and I felt the lump which was the bullet lodged on his back. He had smiled and said, “You weep at my trophies.”

This time he is really gone. When Aslam had visited me in Delhi I had sent an Assamese blanket for him. Four days after reaching Karachi Aslam informed me that a week back Talpur chacha had passed away peacefully in sleep. This time I have a visa for Hyderabad, he is not here to fulfill his promise of a lunch of mangoes from his orchard and Palla fish caught from the Indus and baked with dry fruits.

The entire site is being renovated and the outer covering of the monuments of intricately designed tiles are being replaced. Two kilns have been set up here to bake the tiles of the exact texture, colour and design. It is an Agha Khan Foundation’s project and the in-charge Ghulam Abbas shows me around, pointing out the similarities and differences in the old and new tile work. I also see the presence of the lotus, swan, chakra merging with the star, half-moon and graphic patterns. Symbolism in art crosses boundaries of religion, nations and region. Ghulam Abbas, himself an artist yearns for the regulated

temperature kilns of gas or electricity that would give uniform colour and texture. We hit off immediately and he leaves his work to become my guide.

“You vibe well with old men.” Somebody chuckles in my ear. I know she is there but for once I have no time for her. I am in deep discussion with Ghulam Abbas as he extols about the traditional tile work and designs. We move from the mining of the mushroom coloured stone, to its grinding and sieving to fine powder, the mixing with water and gum, layering in moulds, drying and the three times baking. The base ready he tells me about the colours and shades and glaze and I inform him of my Uzbekistan trip where I saw similar renovation work. I tell him how the artistes there wish to go back to traditional wood-fire kilns; he smiles and wishes an exchange was a possibility because controlled temperature inside the kiln shall yield more uniformity in the colour. As I prepare to leave the complex he gifts me five tiles of different shapes, designs and colours. Lot of weight to carry but my day is made.

Tea houses or ‘Chai Khana’ are strewn all over Pakistan. From the very posh ones to the five rupee glass, Hyderabad has them all. I am explaining the travel of the lotus from the simple 8 to the most complex 104 petal and the contribution of Buddha explaining the complexity within the simplicity and the simplistic within the complex. We are sitting under the concrete umbrella in the open-air restaurant at the Hyderabad Museum complex, sipping a strong brew. “Indian” she informs. “Good tea anywhere is Indian” I say proudly. “Nationalism” she smiles mischievously. “No, fact!” She nods and walks towards the museum. There is a difference in her manner. I still have this strong feeling of having known her forever; but she has changed since last time. She argues less, listens more and often is with me like a silent but alert bodyguard.

Hyderabad Museum is a representation of Sindhi culture; I am seeped in hundreds of Ajrak designs, rillis made with leftover cloth, patterns on camel skin, jewelry, painted cradles, bed posts, carved doorways, fans, bags, shoes and caps. Indus Valley Civilization is at the core of all the art manifested; the earliest effort of humans to build roots, to leave a mark and to explore with a tether. For me artifacts found at Mohenjo Daro and other such sites are an effort to journey out to the beyond with an intended return. From the shop I purchase a couple of embroidered bags for my daughters. I have never asked them to but somehow both my daughters have grown up to become jhola carrying, no nonsense kind of girls. I know they would love these bags just as much as they hated the branded ones I had brought for them from London.

Day before, Altaf Husain the self-exiled chief of MQM has demanded that Sindh should be divided, one for the Mohajirs or migrants from India and one for Sindhis. I find the word ‘mohajir’ humiliating; how can one still be a migrant because one’s parents had once belonged to India? I also find the ‘Mohajir’ sense of superiority difficult to swallow. None of them speak Sindhi, not even the third generation; or know much about the Sindhi culture; or have visited the Sindhi forts, excavation sites, know the cuisine, festivals, or freedom fighters, understand the Sufism of Sindh that has its roots in the Vedas, its trunk and branches in Buddhism and Jainism and its foliage in Islam.

The ethnic Sindhi is naturally affronted by the unfairness of this demand for division. Sindh is a province that shares borders with two other provinces, thus absorbing the cultures and traditions of the larger

portion of Pakistan besides Rajasthan and Gujarat in India. Assimilation seems to be the second name of culture here. Impromptu a celebration of Sindhi language and culture is arranged in the biggest auditorium of Hyderabad. A part of me wants to attend while the other is skeptical. After all I come from the original homeland of the Mohajirs.

“Do not worry” she says. She does not always seem to be an ethnic Sindhi but she seems to know them well. I really need not have worried. Not only am I welcome, I am presented an Ajrak by Bakhtavar, Com Jam Saqi’s married daughter, the one I missed meeting on my visit to their home. Sindhi emotion is high and when Arbab Nek Mohammad begins to speak in Urdu, there are catcalls of ‘Sindhi! Sindhi!’. He raises his hand and announces that he is welcoming the daughter of Com Sajjad Zaheer and hence the Urdu. I am welcome because Sindhis have a special place in their hearts for rebels and I am a rebel’s daughter. I feel a lump in my throat. Is it gratitude for my father for having left me this huge inheritance or for Sindhis who remember him with love and respect?

Manjhi Fakir sings folk and Sufi music; Ghada Husain the most popular poet of Sindhi recites and then walks down the stage to hold my hand. He is helped by some devotees because he is visually challenged. He says the rebellion in his poetry is inspired by Com Sajjad Zaheer and other comrades. This world may not be visible to him but the one he dreams of is a just, equal and fair world.

CHAPTER NINE

Normally after a few days in a new town or city the traveler bug wakes up nudging me to move on. It is my last night in Hyderabad and I do not want it to end. Walking through a fast shutting down market lane we see an open restaurant. The tables and chairs have been cleared and it is being washed for tomorrow. A quick exchange in Sindhi with several glances at my Sari, the owner gives a bright smile and agrees to serve us chaat and tea. No, he cannot dirty his clean floor again and a table and chairs are quickly arranged outside. This is the first time I sample ‘chaat’ which is steaming hot, burning spicy, a mixture of boiled peas, dry fruits, potatoes and crispy flour flakes. The tea is sweet, gingery and served in large glasses to warm one’s hands. My hosts are happy that Sindhis have made a point and bear no grudge against the call for division of Sindh. Altaf Hussain is treated as a joke by them; they know he does not have the guts to come back to Pakistan and face the people; he has to conjure up clownish acts for survival in their memory; he is a minor irritant.

“Most politicians are!”

I have said it to myself almost sure that she would answer, and pat comes the reply.

“But minor irritants should not be ignored, because they are symptoms of a deeper, more severe disease. “

I also knew her answer. Weren’t we facing these communal forces who seemed like a speck of filth we could flick away anytime we wanted. Now it turned out they had grown into a massive force that was

threatening the very fabric of India. In a few months India would have general elections and it seemed as if an RSS BJP wave was sweeping the country.

“I know, they can grow into Frankensteins.”

“Everyone has to handle and overcome their Frankenstein or else-----

She does not say it but I know-----or else be destroyed by them. Will Indian diversity be destroyed? Is the Ganga Jamuni tehzeeb we are so proud of just fizzle away into oblivion? Will it be remembered? Mourned? And when the mourners are also dead will it survive in tales and folklore? Maybe or maybe not. One can wait for time to open its fist and the future to become the present. Or we can take charge of the present to change the course of future. There are so many around me who defied the present and stared back into the glaring eye of the future; the Muslims who refused to leave for a promised land, the Hindus who did not give up on Sindh and those who so loved life that they became History.

In a queue outside an old red brick house that has the nondescript name ‘Bombay Bakery’ written in bold, I am informed that this the best cake shop in Pakistan, more than a century old and is owned by a Hindu businessman Kumar Thandani whose forefathers had refused to migrate to India in 1947. Now it is run by his two nephews. Legend has it that Benazir Bhutto doted on Bombay Bakery cakes. When she first came to power her husband, Asif Zardari contacted the owner asking him to open a branch in Islamabad. When no reply came Zardari, personally visited the bakery and put forth a proposal for a chain of outlets all over Pakistan. The owner heard him through, then got up and patted Asif Zardari’s, the Prime Minister’s husband’s back and said “I bake to please the palette not feed the stomach. Whatever is baked is on the counters by 2pm and is sold by 5pm, increasing the quantity would compromise the quality, something that I cannot do.”

Sindhis narrate this incident with relish. Thandani was a business man but he was also a rebel; and would not cow down before authority, system or state. The first batch of cakes appears on the counter and I select two. There is a rule here and it is strictly followed: one cannot buy more than two cakes at a time. If one wants to serve Bombay Bakery cakes at a wedding one has to queue up 100 people to buy 200 cakes. I am fortunate I congratulate myself.

Alas they were not mine to eat! In one of the many miscalculations that are always part of over-crowded travel, the box of cakes is gifted by Aslam to the daughter in law of my host for the evening dinner in Karachi. I do not mind the loss, but the regret is that this gossipy, dim witted, uninteresting woman has no appreciation of delicate flavors or delectable cuisine. She doesn’t even understand that it is Sindhi artefacts that I wish to buy as gifts for friends in India and offers to take me to a Malaysian leather shop! I am more interested in talking to her mother-in-law Hamra Khaliq who is writing her autobiography which would hopefully elaborate on the early women’s movements in Pakistan. But I get this opportunity only when the daughter in law leaves to offer Namaz; unfortunately this was only two short gaps otherwise she insisted on dominating the conversation which she managed to limit to shopping and food. The cakes have been wasted. As they say there is an age between having a cake in your hand and eating it.

Ah well, that just means that I have to go to Hyderabad again. This time I'll keep more time in hand, meet the owner and sample his cakes.

The morning is bright and sunny and there is salt in the air. Karachi has the flavor of the seaside. I am exploring central Karachi for the building that once housed the Communist Party of Pakistan. In my mind runs the visit to the Hyderabad museum and my long dwelling on the carved rocks and effort to decipher the symbols that range from prehistory travelling over the Indus valley civilization to Buddhism and Islamic carvings. My effort is nowhere like that of R.B. Dayaram Sahni, R.D. Bannerji and John Marshal, who had begun the excavations in Mohenjo Daro and Harappa.

Building and constructions can be unearthed but what happens to ideas and the cause they uphold when they are left buried for so long? At long last the building is located. All the doors of this building are closed, some sealed, others bolted. We make inquiries and are told that the building has been bought by a builder and a big shopping mall is planned. I take a few photographs and turn back. There is more to be done than feeling sorrowful over a lost party office.

Frere hall is one of them; an old style auditorium built by the British, it once held theatre, dance and music performances; it now stands surrounded by iron and wood scaffolding; renovation is underway; but the lawns are alive with activity. This is the day for the weekly used book bazaar. Set up on temporary display stalls are piles of books, thumb- marked and dog eared, informing of past readers and earlier scholars. People around are shoppers with bleary eyes and lost look, picking up books with eagerness, asking the price tentatively, haggling over the price; not happy that they are bargaining knowledge and a friend, but victorious on having got their way. I meet these friends in every city and town, in second hand book shops and 'kabari' bazaars; we are a community.

Suddenly there are kites swooping down from nowhere; I look up and see the sky full of circling kites zeroing down on Frere Hall. And then I see the men carrying pots full of meat, scattering it on the lawns and pathways. They are feeding the kites as promised for protecting a sick child; superstition is a way of life in South Asia, it has mingled with spiritualism, religion and nonchalance, made space for new ones as distance decreased and communities intermingled, stood as major road block to logic and reason and is one of the reasons why Marxism has not been able to strike deeper roots in this region.

Loaded with books that I know shall bring a cervical spondylitis attack I make a wish. Hopefully these lawns, owned by the municipality shall always remain such, never sold to an overzealous builder or unenthusiastic bureaucrat who would stop or transfer this book market.

Books, sun, a nip in the air and hot tea; I am having the time of my life when Aslam's phone rings. It is Jamal Naqvi's son in law Nasir Arain who wants to know when he can come and meet me. Aslam switching on the speaker tells him that we are at Frere Hall and he immediately asks how we got there. 'We took an auto rikshaw' Aslam informs. The man literally splutters and when he manages to control that he begin abusing Aslam who tries to calm him down saying "ok ok, come; yes come here, we shall wait."

"He is upset that I made you ride an auto"

“Why?”

Aslam shrugs and we hurry to the gates. I still believe that he would join us in our stroll. It is only when he is there in his big car and opens the door that I realize we are being taken somewhere. The entrance seems familiar and so does the drawing room. His wife appears, bleary eyed obviously not happy at being woken up at eleven. A working woman making the most of Sunday I think and look at her sympathetically. Turns out she is not. Nasir disappears and returns with some hot Gaajar halwa and then his wife disappears and returns with her father Jamal Naqvi's book 'Leaving the Left Behind'. Jamal Naqvi had been General Secretary of the Communist Party of Pakistan for quite a while and I was surprised to see his latest book named so. I glare at Aslam who has put me in this situation. He looks blank and begins on a story as usual when he wishes to remain non-committal. It seems that Malik Noorani had owned this flat once. So that is why it seems so familiar. I had come here in 1986 when Malik Chacha had invited me for lunch and Chachi had made some delectable fish. Both of them had taken so much care of Abba when he had been underground in Pakistan; they stood by the Left, published books written by communists, opened their bookstore for me to pick up any book I liked and are gone now. How I wish houses that have once possessed so much joy and commitment vanished when the joy givers decided to move on.

Nasir says that he would like to put his car at my disposal and drive me wherever I wish to go. Aslam immediately says, “Noor wishes to visit Mangho Peer.” Nadir loses colour, looks frightened and says, “But that is a dangerous area; no no, I cannot go there and neither should you.” I stand up suddenly. A visitor has to save on time and nobody in Asia seems to understand that. I extend my hand to say goodbye and leave. Nasir looks relieved. What did he think that I would wish to visit? Malls and shopping plazas?

CHAPTER TEN

The black arc is visible for a moment at the horizon and then vanishes. It surfaces again, closer now they are two overlapping arcs. I draw the attention of others and we wait. “Dolphins! Imagine they have not been sighted for such a long while here” exclaims Ayesha. “They have come to meet Noor” smiles Haris. The dolphins dance away, drawing vivid semi circles that connect the sea to the sky.

Aisha and Haris Gazdar, the siblings who have brought me to Hawks Bay Beach because they know that I love the sea, have a hut here. Aisha has a soft beauty, the warmth of her heart reaching out from her eyes; one has to see her documentary films to realize her strength of conviction, her commitment to social justice and human rights. Haris, older by a few years is an economist, a social activist and has a bird's eye view on the political, economic and social scenario of South Asia. The vastness of knowledge seems to have caught him unawares and he has a mildly surprised and bemused expression on his face; happy to know so much but joyous that there is so much more to discover.

The sand on the beach is clean and has deep track marks of turtles having come ashore last night to lay their eggs. It is the mating time of the giant turtles. What wouldn't I give to spend two nights here; one

to watch the giant turtles coming ashore and one for the newly hatched babies instinctively rushing towards the sea? Another wish for Ghalib's "hazaron khwahishe aisi."

Haris and Aisha are children of a leftist couple Mushtaq and Saeeda Gazdar who fought for human rights and stood up for democracy during the Zia ul Haq regime. Arif, a friend who has accompanied us turns out to be Comrade Sibte Hasan's nephew. In a manner of speaking all four of us are ideological cousins. We have been brought up in homes where politics, social justice and peace were discussed over dinner, where war between countries was hated but people's war was a beloved, where children were expected to read and learn but also to think, question and remunerate. I look at the other three. Even if we had not met we would have known each other; this sense of belonging does not require the formality of introductions.

There is wine, and cream-cakes and the hut is small, cosy and barely furnished. It is not a super-deluxe lodge masquerading as a 'hut'. Haris is off for a swim and soon one sees only his head bobbling near the horizon. Arif seems to be a loner and walks away by himself. I long to have a leisurely discussion with him but he has not opened up to me. So many of us who grew up breathing the air warm with revolution, ideology, literature, aesthetics and struggle for justice seem a bit lost in the present times. I wonder if it is the loss of an ideology or the aimlessness of capitalism which we can neither embrace nor completely reject. Aisha suggests we walk along the sea and I roll up my pajamas and walk on the wet sand with waves lapping and missing our feet. I get to know Aisha, one of the not lost ones. She knows what she is about, knows the films she would like to make, the causes she would like to espouse and aches that she has to learn to live with. We talk books, travel and my children; what I am planning to write what she is planning to shoot, and we very knowingly steer clear of our husbands, finances and domestic responsibilities. The walk is like sharing a bowl of chocolate ice cream with a new friend. The ice cream is subtle bitter sweet, not frozen not too melting; each one watching the size of the share the other gobbles; the way we handle the last mouthful is what will decide whether the acquaintance would grow into a friendship or just peter away into a 'Hi there; Bye there' one. We return to the hut and Aisha announces that she too would like a swim. The sea is blue, calm and so inviting. I understand that she cannot stay away and curse myself for not having brought a pair of three quarters and a sleeveless shirt, the right swimming costume for women in Pakistan.

The sun has moved towards the west as I climb the steps of Mangho Peer. For long I have nurtured a fascination for the Sheedis, the African people who have settled down around the Indian coast of the Arabian Sea. Their tribe is now divided by the India Pakistan border. Their music is still distinct, their lifestyle a curious mixture of African and Indian: women enjoy more freedom and worship is a vibrant celebration of life laced with dance and rhythmic drumming than about prayer. Outside Karachi is the shrine of Mangho Peer where the Sheedis from all over Pakistan collect to celebrate the Urs. Haneef Dil Murad Baloch who is working on his M Phil from Karachi University and is an expert on the daily life and rituals of Sheedis and their mentor Mangho Pir accompanies me. He has written many articles in Urdu and English and is an enthusiastic young man who wishes to share all that he knows. Everyone seems to know him at the shrine and he moves around as one of them.

Beside the shrine is the lake where live scores of crocodiles. The oldest amongst them is said to be more than a hundred years old, lives deep inside the lake and surfaces when the biggest drum is played. Feeding the crocodiles is part of the ritual. The presence of the crocodiles is perhaps an adherence to the lost African tradition where the reptile is venerated and loved.

Myth is that Mangho Peer had long white hair and when he died the lice from his hair left as is natural but were loath to leave the place where the Peer had lived and would now be buried. All of them moved to the lake nearby, entered it and turned into crocodiles. The lake is chockful of crocodiles, the sand around is almost invisible because there are so many of them basking in the sun. How do so many of them survive?

I am more interested in the history of Mangho Peer which nobody seems to know. I also want to know how and when did the Sheedhis convert to Islam. Who was Mangho and how did he become the Peer of the Sheedhis? Was he a Sheedhi himself? There are no answers.

Sindhi love for shrines and graves has taken the form of a different kind of Sufism where questions are galore and welcome; whether an answer is possible is a different story; meanings are not hunted, and confusion is celebrated with dance music and poetry. Or maybe this is my inner bewilderment that I see reflected in everything around me, mystification that has led me a dance, forcing me to experiment and discover and move on. Some friends say I am confused; to myself I say, 'you have but one life so get a feel of every aspect of it.' It is my way of celebrating life just as the Sheedhis celebrate it with elongated drums, dancing, yodeling and chanting.

But for the last four years the huge drums have been silent. Taliban has put a stop to the celebration of Mangho Peer Urs. This form of worship where women dance with the men and music is played and songs sung is un-Islamic. Why did they not give up their traditions and their culture when they converted to Islam? Why should they now be deprived of their form of expression in which they invoke a god who has never resented music and dance? It is the usual fanatical insistence of the fundamentalists that their definition of the community, worship and religion is the only correct one. The fact is that land around the shrine is multiplying in value and land mafia is grabbing it. The large ground where the Sheedhis celebrated the Urs is now dug up in foundations for multi-storey buildings, the graveyard nearby has been pilfered of the carved epitaphs, many roads and passages that led up to the shrine are closed leaving a narrow path as an entrance.

I long to strike the cloth covered drums, sorrowful, silent and alone in the corner. What would happen if the drums boomed suddenly? A Sheedhi lady of about my age looks at me with half a smile. She is introduced as Fatima, one of the most melodious and powerful voices the community possesses. The Urs was never complete without her songs. She has not sung for four years now. 'Allah shall see and put everything right' she sighs. What can I say to her? I cannot take away the only consolation she has left!

I have been sleeping only about four hours every day but am as fit as a fiddle; travelling alone does this to me, my body gets an immunity boost, resistance to fatigue develops and my senses are extra alert and sharp. Aslam on the other hand is surviving on paracetamol tablets. Every six or seven hours his eyes are red hot with fever and a little later his brow beaded with perspiration as the paracetamol

begins to work. While he insists on me wearing warm clothes, carries my coat on his arm and checks if I have a shawl in my bag, I can see that he himself is wearing the same thin, threadbare jacket; why did I not think of bringing him a pullover instead of a fancy kurta? Why aren't presents ever useful? Awkwardly I bring out a woolen jersey I have not worn much and hand it to him. He bats his eyes twice, accepts it without a word, and taking off the jacket does it quickly uncaring that I am four sizes larger. Comrades! My comfort zone!

My last few hours in Karachi are crazy with me rushing from packing to attending last calls of goodbyes and buying a few gifts. On Karachi airport the lady at the counter looks doubtfully at my trolley then at the weighing machine clearly showing several kilograms extra and is unimpressed by my "I am a writer." I hand her my Passport and try to look uncaring as she almost shouts "Indian?" A sunny smile follows, and I am through. I am so surprised that I forget to thank her.

"Enemies?" she whispers in my ear and I almost hug her. I am travelling alone in Pakistan; that in itself would raise many eyebrows back home; and she has decided to stop sulking and visit me sometimes.

"I wasn't sulking; I knew you didn't need my guidance anymore." I choke over the sandwich and the gentleman next to me quickly offers a tissue. All airlines in Pakistan serve snacks unlike the private airlines in India. Tea is strong and fragrant and I sigh contentedly. Karachi chapter has gone well and I look forward to my stay with Diep in Lahore and also to the Book launch.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dr. Zubair Ahmed a Professor of English and close friend of Irfan is there with him to pick me up. No Taxis at the Lahore Airport and no auto-rikshaws allowed. But Lahori's have developed their own support system; a car may have been brought by one but is owned by the group he belongs to. Zubair Ahmed is friendly and courteous and a short story writer. In a few minutes we are in a deep conversation discussing the problems of language, script and literature. Zubair Ahmed teaches English, writes short stories in Punjabi and is quite pleased when I point out that Firaq Gorakhpuri also taught English and wrote poetry in Urdu. I am quickly invited to dinner at his house the day after. Every time Irfan is in Lahore from Boston, the farewell dinner takes place at Zubair Ahmed's house.

A foggy chill envelopes Lahore but Diep's house is warm and cozy like her embrace. Entering her house is like coming back home.

Diep is up and about the next day, is a bit surprised by my desire to have lassi with chapatti but complies. Diep is the no nonsense kind of person and her attitude travels to her cooking. She knows she is an excellent hand over the stove but does not shove her preparations down one's throat. I wish I hadn't taken the Chapatti though because Diep has just begun washing Sarson ka saag with promise of Makki ki roti with it for lunch.

I am a bit nervous about the launch of my book. There are too many papers being read about my writings and too many important people attending, the most important being I. A. Rehman. Amjad Minhas had told me that the function would be well attended. If he intended to reassure me the result

was quite the opposite. But I need not have worried. In the crowded hall as I stand surrounded by a few friends a frail old man walks up to me, smiles as he extends the book in his hand and Abba's face smiles at me.

"Comrade Rauf? Rauf Chacha?" His eyes fill with tears as he raises his hand to pat my head bowed to salute him. It is Rauf Malik, younger brother of Comrade Abdullah Malik, my father's comrade and right-hand man in Pakistan. Rauf Chacha had written a book on Sajjad Zaheer in 2006 when his birth centenary celebrations closed, recounting the days of Abba's arrival in Pakistan, his effort in re-building the communist party of Pakistan and the debacle of the infamous Rawalpindi Conspiracy. I had heard of the book but I also knew that it was out of print. Rauf Chacha had a broad smile that reminded me of Abba.

'Maybe commitment to the same cause brings about a similarity in features', she whispered with a cheeky smile. She was one of the many things that were so familiar in Pakistan yet I did not know or recognize them. It was a strange dementia like feeling, knowing but not recognizing.

Abid had really worked hard on the gathering. Anyone even remotely related to the Progressive Urdu writing was there. The papers presented as always gave me credit for assets I did not possess; but then came Neelam Ahmed Basheer. She is the beauty with brains of Lahore. Born in a progressive, liberal family her short stories speak of the hidden and the rejected; and her paper that compared her own upbringing to that of mine struck an immediate chord in my heart. Strange that women from families that had opened up the doors of education and freedom never thought of forming a 'sisterhood', we would have been the answer to renegade 'brotherhoods' everywhere. But we continued to exist as islands and never joined forces to become the mainland. Perhaps that was the failing of Feminism in Asia; it helped break old bonds but resisted the formation of newer ones; individualism overpowered unity and kept at bay the power that togetherness could have brought.

It was a wonderful evening and meeting I.A.Rahman crowned everything. How can someone who has spent so much time in jail, subjected to physical torture and suffered all kinds of mental abuse continue to joke and make people laugh with so much ease? "Humor is the essence of life" a line from Brecht knocked over my heart. If that be so then I..R. Rehman was the one most alive in the auditorium.

Not that there were no snide comments. A gentleman insisted that the flap of my book should have mentioned Abba's name; I wondered if he would have been satisfied if I had mentioned Ammi's name. As far as writing is concerned it was Ammi who taught me how to write, in fact how to think a short story. I. A. .Rehman himself joked about the long list of speakers and the lack of air-conditioning in the auditorium pointedly saying that he would not make a long speech because he was frozen to the bone.

Pakistan produces and distributes LPG in abundance and that is why every house, restaurant has gas heaters connected to the gas pipeline. There are portable versions that heat up a small room within minutes and Diep hurries all over her house to ignite them. It is just Diep and me and over warm popcorns freshly made in a pressure cooker, we share anecdotes, stories and jokes. Far back from the past similar evenings flash before my eyes like a distant blinking light in a dark tunnel. Is it natural to move away from such pleasures? Or is it a norm for a woman to give up female company after getting

married? Why did I who have prided myself for having contested every social bind have to follow the norm? Where are so many of my friends with whom I shared my youth? Where the protests, the slogans, the commitment, the long evenings of writing and translating 'parchas', making posters and sharing the let downs? And why are those memories of cold nights warmed with comradery visiting me now? Is it because I am free of all my social, parental responsibilities? Or am I at the last leg of middle age and am taking a breather to look back with pleasure before moving on to old age where I can only look back with regret?

"It might also be that middle age is the time to take your pick from the spent youth and relive it?" She reaches out for a fistful of popcorns.

"If possible it would take a lot of years. I do not know if middle age would last this long."

"Yoga!"

"No!" the retort is out before I can check it.

She seems a bit surprised and counters "You must extend middle age to relive those years."

"Write! That is what would give me a life and if possible shall extend my life."

"Well everyone to their poison." She concedes with bad grace.

"Those who drink the cup of poison are given no choice; to refuse to drink it or select the poison to consume. Socrates for example."

"Socrates had begun consuming poison much before he was killed. His realization that something different is thinkable; his negation of the accepted; contesting the power of the gods; knowing that it was a dangerous path that he treaded yet walking on it without caution, without regret. For those who dare to question, poison is nourishment."

"Then I have been surviving on slow poison." I want to laugh away the cold squeeze her words have just given my heart.

"Perhaps! Maybe now is the time to increase the dose, to test your endurance, to break out and really live. Diep is a wonderful cook; just smell the flavors arising from the kitchen." She walks away knowing that she had given me enough food for thought to keep me awake through the night. Or is it that I have argued with her; is she upset at that? Last time she was the one who spoke and I listened; this time I am trying to debate with her. Is she disliking me contesting her views? Well she will have to learn to live with it.

Lahore intelligentsia has divided itself into all sorts of groups; there is group of Heer lovers who sit and chat for hours on the beauty of the epic love poem, reciting each line with reverence and discussing each metaphor threadbare, then there are the groups that follow different Sufi poets, there are several showcasing and talk of painting and then there are the theatre groups. Amidst all these is a group that on a weekly basis meet to listen to Hindustani classical music. Zaman Khan invites me and I eagerly dress

up in my best Sari; the right attire in India for an evening of classical music. I am looking forward to hearing a classical singer of Pakistan for the first time and also of meeting Intizar Husain the leading short story writer of Pakistan. So much for my desires that remain unfulfilled. The group has a corner reserved in a posh club and listens to music being played on a CD. In this case it is an ordinary singer giving an ordinary rendering of Raag Darbari. Everyone nods and 'wah wahs' at each other for the 45 minutes that a Bada Khayal and a Chhota khayal followed by a Tarana are rendered. Another thirty minutes the group of six in soft tones as if overwhelmed by the music discuss the rendering. All this while me and Irfan smile and smirk at each other and try to suppress yawns. Right at the door we had been warned not to talk during the 'recital.'

It is very systematic and timed. Right at the stroke of half an hour the discussion stops, and everyone begins talking the weather, Indo Pak relations and the nine month old Nawaz Shareef government. Intizar Husain sahib very kindly gets up and sits next to me. To say that I am flattered is an understatement. I had met him briefly nine years ago when he had come down to Delhi for the Sahitya Academy chapter of the Sajjad Zaheer Centenary Celebrations. I had gifted him 'MERE HISSE KI ROSHNAI' then. He now opens the conversation with 'I read your book.' I sit up straight; any criticism from him would be a guideline for my writing in future; a word of praise would make my decade. He smiles and says, 'you should not have written against your eldest uncle.' I am a bit non-plussed; the book is about commitment: Abba's and of so many others. Why is Intizar Husain sahib harping on the one lone reference to Ali Zaheer sahib? "Facts have to come out Intizar sahib" I reply tentatively. "Facts that do no good are best left untouched. What is the use?" I take a deep breath and ready myself for an argument when I see her standing right behind Irfan and both of them are shaking their heads. "Same city, same people, same attitude." She says and leaves. Irfan gets up in a hurry and says in a rush "We have to meet Zubair and Diep and it shall take us half an hour to reach there." He rushes me out stops when we are almost three buildings away from the club and heaves a sigh. "I was so afraid you would get into a fight with Intizar sahib."

"Actually I would have told him a story about the way Ismat Chughtai was scolded by Aslam sahib, the well-known writer of 'Gunah ki Raat' right here in Lahore."

"You are a strange person. Are you not angry?"

"Of course, I am! I hate men telling me what to write and how to write; but more than that I am unhappy at the loss of an evening in the Paris of the East."

Irfan struts proudly, then turns and says, "Let me then show you something we in our 'Paris' are very proud of. Madam you shall now ride the Metro of Lahore." I am intrigued. Why hasn't anyone ever mentioned metro in Lahore; we in Delhi are so proud of this prize possession that "Delhi has four metro lines" is the greeting to first time visitor guest; Adaab, Namaste comes later. Lahoris are humble people. I correct myself soon as the 'Lahore Metro' turns out to be a corridor on the road on which ticketed passenger buses run. Yes, there is a special window for tickets to the 'metro'.

"So, this is your 'metro', you trickster!" I confront Irfan when we alight.

“Well if Lucknow walas can equate peanuts with almonds then this is one fine ‘metro.’

“The ride was fast and comfortable; thanks to the gentleman who vacated a seat for me.”

“That was for the Sari Comrade”

“Oh really! Try wearing one next time then.” Just ten days back I had hated this city and now here I was enjoying myself with a friend whom I would probably never meet again! Life is so temperamental, always throwing up the good with the bad, forever turning people into jugglers to manage their pain and their joys. Irfan would be gone tomorrow, but there would be others I would meet and become friends with; the heaviness of parting is lightened by the happiness of having spent some wonderful moments with each other. There is seldom ‘till we meet again.’ Separation is a reality, but it comes with the celebration of friendship.

Next day Amjad Minhas takes me out for lunch and introduces me to his friend Mahboob Akhtar. We sit down for lunch on the stone paved sunny courtyard where diners loll on plastic chairs eating, sun bathing and then eating some more. Amjad was a member of the Democratic Students Federation (DSF) that actively participated in the student movement in support for democracy during the Zia Military Dictatorship. He has interesting anecdotes from the period and narrates them lovingly like a jeweler displaying his choicest gems. Apparently, students took to wearing coats even in the summer in those years.

“As a padding to protect from police batons?” I ask.

“Yes, that too; but more to keep bits of chalks and broad sketch pens in the pockets. A few seconds and we would scribble a slogan on the walls, over film posters, across Zia’s murderous face.” Mahboob Akhtar laps up every word. He was a government officer in the ‘80’s when the MRD movement had been raging. He knows he was on the wrong side and is now trying to make up for it. He has left his job, become a businessman, tries and helps progressives as much as he can and most importantly for me is working on the folklore of Saraiki, his mother tongue. I would have loved a long discussion with him because of my own interest in folk traditions. But that is not to be. I leave for Islamabad tomorrow morning. Mahboob Akhtar hears this and sends his driver to buy a ticket for me in the luxury buses plied by Daewoo between all the major towns and cities of Pakistan. He is embarrassed when I try to pay for the ticket and Amjad Minhas intervenes saying that this is the least they can do for a ‘sister.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

I have by now learnt how to light the gas heater. The latest ones have a flint, a spark ignitor and the room is soon warmly cozy. From a horrid beginning this is turning out to be quite a journey.

Imrana arrives early in the morning when I am just finishing breakfast. Guests are not allowed into the rooms but Imrana makes her own rules. Imrana is Aslam’s contact in Islamabad with strict instructions from him to take care of me. We sit down to a cup of tea. Everything in South Asia is manageable. No

one should have been allowed in my room but here I am having tea with Imrana and hearing Anushka's school gossip. Mushtaq, a Kashmiri is the caretaker of the guest house and the night before had warmed up to me when I had stated in a group meeting that I stood for unified, independent Kashmir. Back in my room I had requested a cup of tea and Mushtaq had come up with it. For an hour he narrated the problems of the Kashmiri people in POK or what he called Azad Kashmir. He is a post graduate but cannot hope to get a decent job being a Kashmiri, nor does he have the resources to further his academic plans. A polite, pleasant boy he has spent three years running up and down the stairs, locking doors and cupboards and changing linen in the hope of procuring the job of a clerk in the Academy.

Just now he saw Imrana winning the argument with the security and marching up and decided that tea is a must, if for nothing else then as a celebration. He knocked and placed tea and biscuits just as Imrana had settled down and Anushka her nine year old daughter had begun fidgeting.

Imrana is a slim girl with a delicate face and pale golden complexion; she is married, with two children, is a very good photographer and is pursuing a Masters in film making. I look at her in admiration: blessed are they who keep pushing themselves to discovery. As I look I see the long, dark shadows reaching deep into her eyes. Her clothes, education, attitude show that she is well to do, Anushka is a lovely girl and obviously very happy in her mother's company, her husband is doing a good job and Imrana has given him a son as well, the ultimate in the long list of demands of Asian men. So why does a sublime unhappiness lurk inside her smiling eyes?

She will confide in me; most people do. The woman who visits me only in Pakistan also cannot help confiding in me. I bite my tongue at the thought, I do not want her to take offence and stop visiting; I still have so much to learn to know. My fears are unfounded because I see her standing wrapping and unwrapping a shawl around her shoulders at the Sindh Pavilion at Lok Virsa. Imrana has brought me here quickly understanding what I need; I begin to select the embroidered wallets and purses, ajrak bags and scarves while Imrana walked up to her, quietly unwrapped the mirror embroidered shawl from her back, folded it and draped it over her arm. Oh well I would probably not have been able to afford it in any case. It is a nice shade of earthly brown orange and would suit Imrana.

The two men manning the outlet have been eyeing my bindi for a while. I wonder if I should have removed it; surely one is not killed for wearing a bindi; but maybe some strongly worded queries and remonstrations would follow. Then one of men took off his Sindhi cap, scratched his head and decided to take the plunge "India?" I nod and brace myself for some unpleasantness. "I really want to visit India." I smile back, nod and say, "Please do."

"Which part of India are you from?"

"Father from Lucknow, mother from Ajmer"

"Rajasthan! That is where I wish to visit."

"Ajmer Shareef?" I ask tentatively

He looks around, lowers his voice and says "Nathdwara."

Why do the minorities everywhere have to hide their identity? Why is religion the only identity that figures in the census? I am reminded of the bus conductor in Kinnaur, who admitted to having used his Muslim name only when he was being married. A concession is made for me in the bill, I long to give him a hug but it is not done in Pakistan; Imrana pays for the shawl and then holds out the parcel to me. I refuse, use all my persuasive powers but she is adamant; I give in as she threatens to post it to India. Her smile is sweet which broadens as I tell her that I have decided to wear it for the book launch, but it still has that tinge of pathos in it that tugs at my heart.

“You have become very astute in the decade!”

“Well, I have gained ten years”

“True. And also lost ten years”

“You do not have to point out that I am nearer to death”

“I was only suggesting that loss makes people aware of what they still have. You have learned to listen.”

“I was always good at listening. Remember, I am the quiet one of the family.”

“I was talking about listening to yourself.”

“People have been smirking at finding me talking to myself”

“Well, it is a way of listening to oneself. Why should a conversation with oneself limit itself within the space of one’s hearts? Why shouldn’t it find words that are audible?”

“You give me peace. I thought I needed a psychiatrist.”

“A psychiatrist would also make you speak, remember and think.”

She moves back to the place where she was standing and picking up another shawl drapes it round her shoulders. She has what is my idea of good looks: tall, slim, dark, large intelligent eyes and confident air.

Next day is my big day when my book would be released in Islamabad; but more than that it is going to be my big day because I shall be meeting Kishwar Naheed, the rebel poetess of Pakistan. Then there is dinner at Harris Khalique’s place who has promised to make space for anyone who might wish to meet me.

Dr. Muhammad Qasim Bughio is the Chairman of the Pakistan Academy of Letters and is present at the function. I have met him briefly the day before and filed him away as a down to earth Sindhi who knows his way around in Punjab. It is Malik Mehar Ali the Administrative Officer who has been both welcoming and willing to engage in conversation. He had briefed me about the history and contribution of the Academy, its role in encouraging research and new writing. Maybe because he is himself a poet he is completely at ease with writers; he is one of those large hearted easy-going Punjabis who are an embodiment of the high yielding soil and the songs of the minstrels who have roamed this five-river irrigated land. Their poetry has the contentment of a full stomach and the yearning of the ever-hungry

soul. At the end of the round of the Academy he gifted me Amrita Pritam's works in Urdu script. Is it a hint that he can perceive the longing of my heart? Amrita Pritam was a woman whose thirst despite finding so many outlets remained unquenched forever? Or is he telling me that as a true Punjabi he appreciates the expression of Punjabiya anywhere? He smiles as I raise the book to my forehead, then looks around a bit nervously and says, "Nobody does this here with any book other than the Quran." "Thankfully I am not 'nobody.' We laugh and I proceed to tell him the long evenings I spent at Amrita Pritam's house in Hauz Khas in Delhi, while she and Abba discussed reasons for women writers shunning the Progressive Writers Association or she read out some of her new verses and Ammi read out her stories and Imroze took them round his studio, showing his latest works and I as a child of eight or nine tagged along not understanding much but gaining a lot.

The evening gathering is in the main auditorium of the Academy of Letters. I am honoured that Kishwar Naheed, the rebel feminist poet is attending. She has returned the same evening from one of her jaunts that take her to obscure villages and townships hunting out people, stories and artefacts. She looks tired but happy and the memory of her welcoming hug would always linger with me warming my heart in frustrating, unhappy periods. Hazrat Shaam had informed me that he had a surprise for me but it is a secret. I am wondering whether it is a poem or a gift but it turns out to be Ahmed Saleem, a comrade who understood why the people of one portion of Pakistan were fighting for their identity, the need for democracy to survive and the pain of division of the country that had to be borne because one had to stand with what was right. Ahmed Saleem had been one of the few people who had chosen to stand with the Bengalis of East Pakistan openly condemning those who held their nose in the air and refused to accept a Bengali [Mujib-ul-Rahman] as the Prime Minister of Pakistan even though his party the Awami League had won by popular vote. Ahmed Saleem has been unwell for the several years and most of his friends had assumed that time spent in the struggle for restoration of democracy and punishment for supporting Bangladesh which were largely years underground or imprisonment had taken their toll; but Comrade Ahmed Saleem had surprised the surgeons by surviving a liver transplant at sixty eight and emerged a winner. He is a thin slight man, with alert, deep penetrating eyes that focus on me unwaveringly as he listens to my desire to collect all of Abbas's works written during his stay in Pakistan. Ten minutes later he reaches for my hand and I feel the love he has in his heart for Abba. "Thank you." He says suddenly and smiles at the question he sees forming on my lips "for not making profit from your inheritance." I do not ask him to explain; in a way I am afraid of the answer he might give, it might scale the scab of some of my wounds or worse it might show me my own reality. Four months later in Delhi I received a thick bundle of Abba's writings in Pakistan, sent by Comrade Ahmed Saleem through a visiting friend. I have grown up with the trust and confidence my parents had in their comrades and all I can say is that I keep discovering again and yet again how right they were.

Comrade Ahmed Saleem does not speak much that evening. He has still not completely recovered from the liver transplant; but there are several papers and speeches and then a beautiful poem by Rana Sayeed Doshi. The electricity fails as I stand up to speak. Hazrat Shaam and Rana Sayeed Doshi run around to find the fault but there are people who prefer the simple way out. Several mobiles light up and I continue to speak which carries on into an hour of dialogue till Kishwar Apa decides to call an end to the meeting. We continue talking because the electricity is back and the usual luke warm tea, soggy

pakorras and cold samosas, the trade mark of a good literary meet are served. We as a people seem to believe that the audience can have one or the other; where hot tea and crispy snacks are served one can be sure that the discussion to follow would be mutual back scratching.

Biting into a fried chilli pakora Kishwar apa confides "Actually it is time for my evening drink."

I kiss her on her cheek saying "Would have loved to join you but I am invited to Haris Khalique's place"

"That is where I am going" adding conspiratorially "Who drinks with one's own money? Have I not earned even this much?"

We laugh as only women who understand the hypocrisy of patriarchy can, pile into a car and reach Haris Khalique's den. The way the house is furnished, the books strewn around, the fragrance of good coffee mixing with spices and wines speaks of the 'adda' to come.

A long lost cousin Naheed turns up with her English husband, Hafeez Chachar, Nazir Mahmood, Hazrat Shaam have accompanied us. There are a number of guests waiting for us and the party begins. Kishwar Naheed downs two shots of vodka before settling down to a leisurely 'screwdriver'. "One has to be slightly tipsy to enjoy good liquor." She says almost as if she is coaxing me to follow. But I wish to go on another trip- to hear Kishwar Naheed recite her path breaking poem 'Ham gunahgaar auraten.' She seems pleased when I make the request and without much ado narrates the poem which is more like embarking on a journey to be for women kind.

Ammi had once narrated to me how her father had a set of followers who would always insist on eating the leftovers from his plate. They believed that the 'jootha' of a Syed would bring them good health. I pick up Kishwar Apa's glass and tell myself 'be a fighter like her.' She hardly notices that I have stolen her drink, asks for another, brushes away Naheed's insistence that we should begin soup with 'what is the hurry? Can't you let two women get drunk properly?' and begins to narrate to me how Faiz had once said to her "You write verse like Sajjad Zaheer; almost prose but not quite."

In between a wonderful Chairperson and a capable administrative officer there is a director who supposedly manages the Academy of Letters. He is not a writer or an academic. He is from some services and so does not come for most of the events held at the Academy. However, the morning after the programme he asks Malik Meher Ali sahib to bring me over for a cup of tea to his office. Hazrat Shaam arrives and both he and Malik Meher Ali accompany me to the Director's office. It is a well-furnished office, velvet covered sofas, teak wood paneling, a huge table which has neither speck of dust nor a bit of paper on it. As tea arrives Director Sahib embarks on a long tale of harassment that he had suffered on a visit to India where he could understand that he was being questioned by the Indian police posing as waiters and clerks. I longed to tell him that I meet his kind all the time; there are men who on learning that I am a feminist inform me of the torture they or their close friends have suffered at the hands of women; then there some who tell me stories of the corrupt leftists; immoral atheists and more recently cruel multi divorced, multi married Muslim men. I do not know what he or his kind wish to achieve. I sit through his tirade because of the slight head shakes Hazrat Shaam has been directing towards me but when the soliloquy turns to an Indian woman wanting to sleep with him I laugh out

loud. He turns a bright pink and I am happy that Dr. Mulk Raj Anand's advice works. Decades ago Mulk Chacha had taught me the use of a full throated laugh in putting people in place. Just now I can almost see the humiliation I have caused racing through the head of this insipid non-person. I get up leaving the tea, pointedly saying, 'I have to pack'.

Outside I turn to Hazrat Shaam to apologize and find him giggling. We walk towards the academy's cafeteria, sit in the sun and order tea. A couple of young poets and a painter join us, and we talk like old friends.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

This has to be a hallucination! I cannot believe it. I am standing in one of the class rooms of the famed Takshila University. I am walking the lanes where once more than ten thousand students are said to have been enrolled from Greece, Babylon, Syria, China and all over India. Experienced Masters taught Philosophy, languages, medicine, surgery, politics, warfare, archery, commerce, documentation, mathematics, music and dance. This university had more than sixty departments and five hundred teachers that included legendary scholars like Panini, Jivak, Kautilya and Vishnu Sharma. Chanakya's great treatise on politics and economy 'Arthashastra' is said to have been written here.

For ten centuries Takshashila is said to have been one of the biggest seats of learning and wisdom. And yet it all came to an end because everything has a life. At some point of time inner rivalry, lack of patronage, interference of the financiers and apathy of the public led to the decline of important institutions and the following generations look back in awe and claim to be the inheritors of its greatness without possessing the strength of learning and wisdom or practicing its freedom of thought, faith and ideology.

This is the only place in the world that this sculpture can be found. Not big, and probably not very important seeing that the carving is a panel on what must have been a side wall, the woman sits on a flying bird, comfortable and royal. Her features have been eroded with time but she is very definitely a two faced woman.

Questions crisscross my mind as I stand before her. Who was the sculptor? A Greek student remembering Janus and questioning his own mythology? The two-headed god who seemed to know everything and was ever ready to answer questions; but while one face gave an answer to the question that pleased the inquirer the other face spoke the complete opposite. Generally considered an unreliable god Janus is perhaps the only honest one to openly proclaim that there are at the very least two answers to a single question. Was this student trying to give something new to the Indian mythology? Or was he a jilted lover, not completely over his passion channelizing his pain into art, seeing women as most men do disloyal, corrupt and unfaithful. Or maybe he was a realist and while living in Taxila in the atmosphere of peaceful reflection he was able to see that this is what women had

to do to survive in a patriarchal set-act, manage brothers, fathers, sons, keep many men happy to make some space for themselves, have their approval to be able to do somethings in their own way, play one man against the other to make small gains? Was this man the first thinker to realize that it is the wishful thinking of men to depict women with a single face and a single body? It is easier to lay claim over a single body and simpler to own a single-track mind. It is also simpler to accept this point of view and get on with one's life rather than get into a debate with the powerful and waste time. After all one lives just once as every woman knows. Women have always been multidimensional both physically and by nature or else how else can there be a mother and a beloved in the same being, sublime devotion turn to carnal desire in the same body, submission and surrender turn to wild dancing at shrines. Being multi-charactered is not a psychological complexity in women, it is a way of life. Question also arises if there were women residing and reading here. If they were and one of them had expressed a desire to make a sculpture, she would expectedly have been assigned a non-descript part of the site, a place not really visible, not often visited; and she realizing the obvious second class treatment decided to make do with what was allowed and turn it into something novel; something hidden though it may be would not go unnoticed; maybe this was carved by a woman who was depicting her reality.

"I think you should observe her properly and move. Your friends are waiting for you."

"Let them. They are the ones who came thirty minutes late; they are the ones who did not find out that the Museum would be closed today for the Prophet's Birthday. What were they thinking of? I know many of them have never visited the University site even though they live in Taxila town."

"Just as you have not visited Agrasen ki Baoli in Delhi even though you cross Hailey Road practically every day."

"Whose side are you on?" I ask her waspishly.

"Dear dear! Do I have to take sides to be heard? Listen you can do your thinking later, in the quiet of your room."

"Thoughts do not visit on command. This is a place where they float in the air; thoughts that were written down and the hard copy lost to time, thoughts that were carved on stone to increase their longevity yet gave in to water, air and dust, or the text is available but the language lost and the script is undecipherable; such thoughts look for fertile soil; maybe I can absorb some, maybe some shall find a home in me. I cannot give up the opportunity." I say wistfully almost to myself

"They are your hosts and want to spend time with you. You might not meet them ever again." She is insistent.

"You have turned very middle class in the last nine years." I turn towards the waiting group with bad grace.

I am immediately ashamed of myself as I see the seventy plus poet Saeed Gul waiting patiently for me to finish with my brooding and speak to him. I begin to apologize but he stops me with a wave of his hand. He wants to know what I think of the site, of the way it has been preserved. Other poets, Dr. Nazir

Anjum. Waheed Nashad, Tariq Basheer, Shahzad Adil. Aali Shuaar Bangash come close and we talk of the site and its significance as an important seat of learning in the world. I compare it to Jawaharlal Nehru University which is not even fifty years old; they in turn question if I think arguments, discussion and dissent would have formed an important part of learning here. I tell them that knowledge grows only when questioned, and debate is the basis of scholarship; I add as an example that just as races kill themselves by inter-marrying so scholars bring an end to learning and wisdom by repetition and acceptance. Nazir suddenly intervenes and begins talking about the weather. I look at him in surprise and realize that I have committed a faux pas; all are Muslims and must have married their cousins.

The roads have been given a coating of loose gravel, the area is clean and strewn with well-informed guides who have followed us and smile a bit sheepishly as I correct their pronunciation. They are well meaning and do not disturb or pester. One of them offers to show me the place where present day Buddhist pilgrims from South Korea and Thailand light candles. He even has a candle in case I am religious, and this is a pilgrimage for me. I smile and ask him to guide me to the Bihr mound which was probably used as a point to mark the University but is also the mound where Alexander is said to have stood and viewed his victory over Taxila. The Buddhist or the Dharmarajika complex has the stupa with study chambers and prayer rooms that make up the monastery area around. This is the largest Buddhist establishment in the Taxila region and dates from the time of Ashoka, the great Mauryan emperor who united India in the 3rd cent BCE and is known in some Buddhist sources as Dharmaraj, the name which the site itself is associated with. It is believed that Dharmarajika is one of the locations where a part of the remains of the Buddha himself were buried and this makes it a relic depository stupa or Dhatu-Garbha stupa. Ashoka had an affinity with Taxila; he had been a governor of the area during the time of his father Bindusara and so chose this as one of the locations to deposit the remains of Buddha.

Ashoka turned to Buddhism quite a while after he inherited the throne. Meanwhile he had waged successful battles, annexed most kingdoms of the Indian Peninsula and become a mighty emperor. Why did he suddenly decide to convert to Buddhism after the battle of Kalinga? He had seen an equal amount of killing in earlier battles. Did his younger brother turning a Buddhist monk influence him or did converting to Buddhism give him the opportunity to put his own ideas at work? Did patronage by such a powerful emperor, open ways for corruption to enter Buddhism and lead to its distortions.

It is said that a lot of precious stones and gold and silver coins were discovered here during the excavations. Some of them have been placed at the Taxila Museum, more are to be found in the British Museum. I wonder what such wealth was doing in a university and in a monastery that are said to have been formed on the principles of Buddha who shunned all wealth. I suppose propagation of religion and maintenance of preachers needs money and not all preachers need to be monks or ascetics. Or maybe Buddhism that had attained state patronage in Buddha's time was turning into a doctrine religion it would become later on, when the Mahayana and the Vajrayana would overtake the Hinayana and turn Buddhism from the Sangha where individuality was as important as the collective to the ritualistic and performative. Earthly wealth plays an important role in the practice of ritualistic religion.

Sirkap is the only other portion of Taxila that I have time to visit. I have a Visa for Taxila. I would have loved to spend a night on the site and roam around in the dead of the night. I could then speak to the

stones as did the Inca people, but then they knew the language of the stones and I don't. Do the stones know any of the languages that I do? Do they know them well enough to have a conversation? Would they then tell me stories of caravans negotiating the Silk Route? There is no opportunity of doing this because my hosts would not hear of such a thing. We walk towards Sirkap which lies on the other side of the Tamara stream and is believed to have been built through the 2nd century BC. Wide streets, impressive fortification, a well-planned city of the well to do.

Anything old in the Indian sub-continent runs back into the Ramayana or the Mahabharata and the original Taxila or Takshashila is said to have been built by Bharat younger brother of Ram for his son named Taksak. But I prefer the Kosambi version that it was built by the Naga tribesmen who were the first scientific carpenters and for this reason were called Taksaka, the Sanskrit name for carpenters. Anyways whoever might have commissioned the several cities that became the Taxila complex it is always the people who build, construct, decorate and thrive in such places. People the builders, the preservers and the destroyers- the Tridev. Would the stones have spoken to me about the people who had mined them from quarries, lifted and dragged them to the site, chiseled and shaped them to erect the walls that housed the wisdom and preserved the learning? At dawn, before day break would these stones have guided me to fringe settlements where the carvers and artisans still sculpt images of Buddha, Tara and Yakshis in the Gandhara style. They do so covertly and have to sell their creation at throwaway prices because the rising fundamentalism frowns at their art calling it 'butparasti' [idol worship]. Traders who sell these sculptures to unsuspecting tourists as original ancient artefacts buy at throwaway price with threats of exposure and social boycott.

Yet these artistes continue to love these stones and work on them. Will the stones tell me who they are? Are they the progeny of the Greek, Central Asian, Indian artistes who created this complex thousands of years ago; or are they the wandering souls that found a halting peg when the complex was excavated.

"No one has answers, but you could come back to the present and accept the gift."

I jerked out of my reverie to find Rana Sayeed Doshi extending a 'starving Buddha' toward me. He had just bought it from one of the sculptors; both he and the artiste were smiling a bit awkwardly at my being lost to the world around me.

"It happens" the artiste nods sagely. Rana Sayeed Doshi has already paid for the Buddha, so I buy another one, silently cursing the wretched system that made an artiste rejoice at a measly two thousand rupees.

Rana Sayeed Doshi is a poet from Punjab. He had visited Agra Literature Festival in 2012. Though a shy rather quiet man he had jumped up suddenly to join the Indian writers dancing at the end of the festival. This had led to rest of the Pakistanis joining in quickly followed by the Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans and Afghans. Rana Sayeed had been quite pleased with himself and when he had been hugged by my son Anuran his eyes for some reason filled with tears.

Rana Sayeed is from Taxila though he works in Islamabad driving the forty kilometers up and down on a rickety scooter every day. He had been very excited at my getting a Visa for Taxila and it was he and

Hazrat Shaam who had organized my stay and the book launch in Islamabad. He had informed all the writers and most of them had turned up to have tea with me at the canteen of Taxila College of Engineering. How like a writers meeting in India's small town gathering; no velvet chairs in an air-conditioned room, or expensive sound system and carpeted floors but meaningful conversation, warmth and a desire to make me feel at home. Some of the poets recited their verse, others asked questions about Indian politics, the changes happening, the allusive peace and the unending poverty of South Asia.

Suddenly Hafeez jumped up, clapped his hand and said 'There is time! We can do a round of Jaulian for Ma.' I hear the word and I am up. Surely, I am dreaming! Jaulian! I had never even imagined I would see it in my life. Immediately there is a shouting down "You want her arrested" "She doesn't have a visa for KPK" "It is in KPK?" "We shall be back before sundown" "I know we can do this" "She shall be arrested and escorted to the border." "That would be a wonderful send off!" "Such risk is not advisable"

All through the mayhem Hafeez has his arm on my shoulder and is determinedly and carefully pushing me to his car. I am myself almost running to catch the chance of a lifetime while Hazrat Shaam, Rana Sayeed and others run after us with worry writ large on their faces. Nazir Mahmood on the other hand is smiling and complaint. He shall comply with whatever his elder sister desires.

Hafeez is a young Sindhi who speaks all the languages and dialects of Pakistan. He also knows the devnagari because of the Pundit ji in his village who taught the scriptures to the Hindu boys and girls. Hafeez had been much in demand in the media and was last employed by the BBC Hindi. A year before he had visited Delhi with Aslam Khwaja and stayed with me. The first few days he had been mostly silent; it is my guess that he had been perplexed at finding an Indian communist, Muslim, bohemian, alcohol drinking woman living life on her terms. But then he had opened up and living up to the concepts of the South Asian male had begun calling me 'Ma.'

Hafeez is not very tall with a beer paunch, a broad face and wide smile with deep, inquisitive eyes. He has a large head which is made larger with abundant jet-black hair, his lower face grows a dark shadow within a few hours of the morning shave and he has to shave again if he is to attend a dinner party. In short, he looks like a bear and behaves like one; generally jovial, loving and helpful but once in while bursting with anger like a grizzly bear cheated out of a bee hive.

Hafeez has taken charge and orders everyone around ignoring their apprehensions. Only a few drop out, most accompany us; maybe they have not visited Jaulian the 'city of the saints' or maybe they would enjoy the adventure of seeing Sajjad Zaheer's daughter arrested for not having a visa of KPK, or maybe they wanted to be around to help in case such a mishap happened. Hafeez is driving and I am sitting beside him. "First thing Ma, you have to keep your head covered, thankfully that is a wide enough shawl you are wearing; keep dropping Inshallah, Mashallah loudly for no rhyme or reason. That proves you are good Muslim. Never address a guide yourself, ask questions through me and please do not be too interested in the sculptures and the site. Look bored like any good Muslim woman would" The last is a difficult one and I turn to argue "Please Ma, it is KPK. Those are not my beliefs, but they have to be followed, it is KPK."

A few miles can make such a huge difference in culture and attitude. I nod my acceptance; anything, even a shuttle burqa to be able to visit Jaulian. What would it take to visit Takht Bahi?

“Keep yourself focused. There is not much time and you have to see a lot.” For once I follow her instructions without a murmur. She is right, there is so much to see and observe; the cool greenery outside, the lush banks of Jhelum and the hill at a distance which has the Monastery of Jaulian, situated away from the hustle and bustle of Sirkap and Dharmarajika, a place to meditate, to think, to ponder and a place to create; not to impress, not to sell but to assimilate and experiment. That is why there are so many styles present in the sculptures of this monastery.

It is a steep climb up and because I wish to spend as much time as I can on the site I run up the stairs. Nazir has thankfully maintained himself at fifty plus and keeps me company while Imrana and her daughter Anoushka are close behind. The rest are left behind, and I can see Hafiz keeping them involved with stories of his BBC days to make their progress even slower. He wants me to have time at the site. The hilltop is like reaching an oasis in a desert.

The previous government of KPK was both progressive and ardently nationalist. As KPK turned more and more fundamentalist and when the Bamiyan Buddhas had been destroyed the administration decided to protect this site. The main stupas with their decorated bases and platforms are surrounded by strong iron grills and mesh; not that they would stand a chance against anti-aircraft guns deployed at the Bamiyan but are a protection against some trigger-happy Taliban follower who just might deface these exquisite works. Caged meditation chambers are not the right atmosphere for retrospection but one should probably not expect freedom and patronage to co-exist and protection for posterity has its importance when freedom would reclaim its space.

I spend an hour there and Nazir pointedly looks at his watch; Hafeez has managed to keep the crowd away but I know that they must be worried. This place must have been always meant for short visits, I console myself as we begin the downwards trudge, since the only water source is at the base of the hill some hundred metres down. We come down and I see what I had missed in my hurry to go up. There are proper steps leading to the water source. The Pathans and their male chauvinism be damned this is something I cannot give up and holding Anushka's hand I race down the steps; both of us dip our hands and splash water on each other; holy water because it has been there for so long, holy because it has quenched the thirst of so many scholars and artists and cooled the sweating, tired bodies of the laborers who carried the stones uphill. As I scoop the water and touch it to my head I know that I shall remain forever indebted to Hafeez.

On our way back, I am in Nazir's car and he asks me to move to his house the next day. The next thing I know he has already listed all that I shall do while I am at his place and is stopping the car on the outskirts of Sargodha where several juice pressers are lined up beside the road. Pakistan produces the best Kinoo in the world and Sargodha Kinoo is the finest in Pakistan. The juice is deep orange with a fragrance to revive the dead and a taste to beat the flavor of pure nectar. “No wonder Eve ate the tasteless apple; she knew she would be thrown out of paradise and would then be able to eat the earthly kinoo.” Nazir is pleased and promises more kinoo juice in the next few days. Nazir has lived in

USSR for two years and sampled the best Vodka; the drive back is laced with a heady discussion that ranges from Vodka cocktails with orange juice as one of the ingredients, Russian writers and philosophers and the politics of the USSR break up.

I meet Sanobar properly for the first time. I had caught a glimpse of her during the Sajjad Zaheer Centenary but there had been no opportunity to really talk to her. I look forward to talking to her theatre days and now her work in the cross-border peace initiatives.

But Nazir had other ideas and had invited a crowd of writers and poets. I learn that he has recently rebuilt his house, with a huge library in the basement. The crowd of people is big and Nazir begins by introducing me. He has only completed about two sentences when one of his guests interrupts saying, "we shall learn about Noor Zaheer ourselves, tell us something about yourself first." It is then that I realize that there are several gate crashers whom Nazir assumed were my guests. Nazir and Sanobar have a reputation of serving good food and wine so there are often gatecrashers at his parties. But asking the host to introduce himself is really brazen. This one is a professional gate crasher and I know just how to handle them. "Sanobar! What juice do you have?" "All kinds Noor Apa but why do you----" she stops midway and looks uncertainly at Nazir who has obviously told her that I make excellent punch. "Please give some peach juice to this gentleman; he obviously does not drink alcohol and you can give me the same spiked with vodka." The fellow is crushed, though I know it is only for a while before he shall recover and help himself from the wine trolley. We meet them at all times; in embassy parties, wedding receptions, they are the free boozers and in a society where one has to keep up pretenses of being Allah fearing, one can understand the trouble one would have to take to get one's daily supply. But then I do expect the gate crashers to not be so pushy once they have been allowed in and to remember that they are not doing the hosts a favour by being there.

Sanobar is warm, interesting, likes to laugh and make others laugh. But she is the only one. The wives of the writers are conspicuous by their absence. Hazrat Shaam had brought his wife to the evening programme and is apologetic that she had to go back soon because they have a six month old son; but the rest of the 'the progressive crowd' are happy talking to 'other' women and keeping their own wives safe in their house. I turn and give Nazir a hug and whisper 'thank you'. He smiles happily believing that I am grateful. I do not tell him that I am grateful not for the party but for the love I see in his eyes for Sanobar; the love that persuades him to give her space to work, explore, exchange and be herself.

I stay a day with Nazir who has arranged to drive me back to Lahore. "I have a favour to ask Nazir. I know the motorways of Pakistan are excellent but -----."

"You would like to take the Grand Trunk Road to Lahore" He completes my sentence. "I was planning to take you that way. We can see the small towns; elevated motorways are lifeless and impersonal."

"Yes, that and ----."

"You want to see the route taken by Comrade Sajjad Zaheer when he drove down from Lahore to Rawalpindi for the meeting with General Akbar Khan."

What do I hope to find on a road traveled by a man trying to re-establish the base for the people's movements, build a base for a communist ideology for people's struggle? Can anyone answer the questions that have raised their heads again and again in my heart? Was he getting fed up of the underground existence? Was he missing home, family, his city, his mother tongue? Did he have any other option but to trust Faiz Ahmed Faiz who had arranged the meeting? Did he believe in the possibility of the Pakistan Army and Pakistan Communist Party coming together to overthrow the government? Was he seeing the loosening of the grip of the government on the people, the unrest brewing and believed that he should leave before things worsened? Was the whole exercise later dubbed the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case really a means to find the lost road that led home?

I know that no one holds the answers to all these questions; least of all a much-used road that has been a silent witness to the movement of so many armies and caravans; why would it divulge to me the thoughts of a man trying to find a way for the survival of the movement of the masses because he believed that they had a right to decide their own destiny. How desperate was his situation that he was trusting an institution that he knew was based on complete obedience and total subjugation? And when the meeting fell through did he feel a sense of relief on his way back? Had he known all along that armies by their very construct stand on the opposite side of the civilians and that is why a civilian government must control the army? Or did the realization come while he was talking to the army officers. And most importantly did he realize that all roads now led to nowhere; that the one single meeting had closed all doors of exit for him; that he would now be chased, hunted and finally caught by a regime that had to create a fear of identity and existence among the people to prove that it was in control.

The road remains silent; occasionally it opens up in pits and ditches, sometimes there are speed breakers. No this is not the road trying to say something to me, these are natural conditions of the old road of South Asia that have been discarded in favour of express highways and elevated motorways. But it is here on the much used, neglected roads that life continues to camp. Nazir stops at a place lined with huge earthenware jars announcing 'kulfi' in brilliant reds and greens. This is Gujranwala and the buffalos of this district produce the best milk in Pakistan. I am still full of the excellent parantha breakfast Sanobar served me, but Nazir buys two kulfis in large earthenware pots calmly suggesting that we eat half of each. They are pistachio and almond flavored. Punjabis of Gujranwala like their flavours defined and there is no 'mixed dry fruits' and 'tuti fruity' kinds. The sun is warm and golden, the fields around are a deep green, with a mustard plant in a hurry showing some yellow. The air with a nip is clean and smells of freshly cut grass and the Kulfi just right, not rock frozen, not running milk. I know my tonsils shall flare up tomorrow in protest but what the heck! You only live once.

Next stop is a sprawling garden restaurant in Jhelum. This is the town where Faiz' father began his practice as a lawyer, this is where Pakistan army gets most of its officers from and this is where I see four six door Mercedes cars parked in a row. What could be happening?

"Nothing! These cars are hired for weddings and funerals. Each costs a ton and by the hour!" informs Nazir.

“But four in one place?” I am still not able to digest this.

“Jhelum is one of the richest areas in Pakistan; the army officers have invested heavily in their town and people hire two or three or maybe more of these limousines in one go. Keeping them is lucrative business.”

We sit down to a quiet cup of tea in a sunny portion of the garden coloured with dahlias and gladioli and Nazir explains how the army buys huge tracts of agricultural land outside urban areas, develops, divides and sells it to army officers who further divide and pass on plots to the civilians. The area is well planned and secure because army keeps the maintenance and security with it and does not allow civilian Resident Welfare Associations to come up. These are ‘Defense’ areas in every city and town, the poshest, best equipped and secure.

We are entering Lahore and Nazir need directions to Model Town; he points to a policeman and coaches me “Take down the window glass say ‘salaam waalekum’ first and then ask the way.” I follow, get instructions and then smile and say, “You are very polite to the uniform!”

“Women have to be very polite here or else they are either ignored or misbehaved with”

“Why? All I want is directions”

“Which proves that you are an outsider. Women are not supposed to be in areas they do not know. It reflects their character.”

“Please! You do like to exaggerate; you a progressive!”

“Noor Apa, even I have to toe the line. In one of the jobs that I held the incentive was a Hajj. Now imagine an atheist like me being given such a perk. I could not refuse when I was selected, that would have amounted to blasphemy. No Muslim in their right senses refuses an all paid Hajj! I should have fallen on my knees and thanked Allah! Can you imagine my fate had I been so blasphemous as to refuse? I did the next best thing, I asked them to arrange for Sanobar also. I believed they would refuse, but they accepted and even praised me for including my ‘shareek-e-hayaat’ in my redemption, sinners that all women are! “

“So I have spent two days with a Haji and a Hajjani ! “

“Forget it, as we have.”

“Have they let you forget it”

He is quiet for a while before saying “No! We still get emails, invitations asking us to bless newborns or just married couple. We are running out of excuses!”

I am wonderstruck by the way religion, state, society everywhere have all united to make people unhappy and alone. “You will like Diep; she is like us.” I console lamely.

“I have heard about her. She must be lonely.”

“No, she has her work and commitment” Nazir nods.

Diep is waiting but she has to rush off to the police station to get the FIR of a domestic violence case lodged. The victim a girl in her teens is waiting for her but she promises to be back in half an hour. The house is warm and smells of butter and sarson ka saag. Diep who was summarily divorced for not giving birth to a son, Diep who stands against the blasphemy laws of Pakistan, who is the only one to give a call to hold a candle light vigil in memory of Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab killed by his bodyguard because he wanted a rethink of the blasphemy laws; Diep who took up social activism as a therapy for post-divorce depression and was so moved by the poverty she witnessed in interior Punjab that she gave up eating meat and dairy products, but she has not stopped serving it; whose three daughters have made brilliant careers for themselves and have become fighters like her; Diep who reappears in the promised half hour and proceeds to make ‘makke ki roti’ to go with the ‘saag.’

Nazir takes me to visit Dr. Mubarak Ali, the foremost Historian of Pakistan. I have read one of his books and am overwhelmed by the panorama of his vision that connects the history to the present. He and his wife are welcoming and warm, both of them have an aura of togetherness about them which only people in love with each other have or maybe people who believe in each other and know that they stand with the truth. Mubarak Ali sahib is constantly under attack from the fundamentalists who have in the recent past become a law unto themselves. Is it recent; the narrowing down of minds, the oppression of the fanatics? Or has it always been like this? Will it ever change? Shall all the struggles undertaken for a just, free, equal society always be just a glimmer on the horizon that would show its bright face only to vanish till another struggle is undertaken?

I come back holding his book to my heart; Diep cannot climb stairs and my room is on the first floor. We sit on her bed snuggled inside blankets and talk late into the night. With Diep there is the assurance of her always having been around that wipes out the regret of not having known her before; she talks about her work, narrates incidents of her life, is curious about my having been married to a Hindu, asks about the religion my children follow; I tell her about my work, the Party Office and my writing. She pours tea for me from the thermos and says, “I wish you lived here.” She says it casually, but it still is the best compliment I have ever received.

“It matters not what is said, it matters though how it is said.” She is half lying beside me, one arm cradling my head while the other hand strokes my brow. A slow-paced pathos is invading my being. I have not had the time to talk to her much. She also has left me alone; her behavior is like that of a toddler’s mother who leaves it alone to walk and fall because that is the only way one can learn to walk straight. I have missed her but not much; there have been so many real people to talk to. Is she not ‘real’ then? Her fingers stop moving in my hair. But I have always believed in the imagined as being real and reality as fiction; whatever she maybe she is my reality. The fingers start moving again.

“I do wish to talk to you, but I am so sleepy”

“Sleep then, tomorrow is a busy day.”

“Every day has been so busy that I have not had time for you.”

"It doesn't matter"

"It does. There are still so much unexplained"

"My dear, I am not religion. I do not claim to have all the answers, nor do I aim for complete subjugation."

"Would you rather have me grapple with queries"

"Grappling yields the answers"

"And sometimes more questions"

"Isn't that nice? It makes the road unending."

"I am not sure I like you" I say sleepily

The last thing I hear is her tinkling laughter splashing the words "Surety is the weapon of patriarchy. Women should not be sure about anything."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Diep is an early riser and by the time I come down she has already called several of her friends, found Rauf chacha's address and phone number, contacted and informed him of my arrival and got his promise to be at her place by eleven. In between Lassi, parantha and my wrapping the sari she informs me that Amjad Minhas' wife would accompany me to Anarkali for shopping and that there is a gathering of journalists and writers in the evening. I am still stammering through thanks and offer to help when she is already out of the door to sort out things in a slum settlement that is communally volatile and where tension has resurfaced.

Words change their garb as they travel. In India, communal tensions mean friction between two religions; in Pakistan, especially in Punjab, riots happen between different sects of Islam; Shia, Hazaras, Ahmediyas are targeted; sometimes they retaliate, often several are killed in bomb attacks which is followed by peace marches and roadside meetings. All riots have a pattern like a swirling 'imarti'; syrupy, sweet, tasty and perfectly designed with one step following another in perfect order to yield the complex sweetmeat. Who are they who have so carefully prepared the dough, allowed it to rise and yeast just right, ladled it into piping tubes, heated the oil to the required temperature, piped and fried the bland dough to a yellow, scooped and dipped the fritters in the golden syrup to yield the dessert ready for sampling? And where are they hidden?

“Not hidden anywhere, they are right there before our eyes”

“So why aren’t they identified?”

“They are one of us, who do we identify?” She has a point and I remain silent to think it out.

“Shall I tell you a story?”

“Anything to lighten this burden.”

“I make no such promise, but here is the story: There was a liberal, progressive couple, who had children. When the children were in their teens the couple decided to teach them their religious scriptures. In a year’s time the young ones learnt quite a lot and the parents proudly began showing them off; but soon the children began to point out the short comings in their parent’s life, the lack of regular worship, the jokes on religion and the puns on the devout. In a few years there came into existence a wide gap between the parents and the children who were now ashamed of possessing such irreligious, ungrateful to God, parents. The parents turned to religion in a bid to bridge the gap and the children became their guides to help them navigate the waters of faith that they had long abandoned.”

“Where did this happen?” I ask because it is all too familiar.

“Could be anywhere. Don’t you know a comrade whose daughter belongs to the Hindu hardliners? Have you never seen young boys and girls distributing Prasad, arrogantly asking worshippers to open their shoes at Durga Puja, joining the ‘visarjan’, running around managing the pandal or ordering women to cover their heads when entering a Dargah or a Milad gathering?”

“I think that there is a lack of entertaining occupation; and religious rituals fill that gap.”

“Perhaps! But that gap can be filled up very well with theatre or music or sports; these are the choices that are never made or given up in support of or condemnation by religion.”

“It is so lovely to meet you again Noor.” Rauf chacha enters without ringing the bell or knocking. Diep’s is an open house and everyone seems to know this so no one stands on ceremony.

Some years ago, he wrote a book of his memories and the time Sajjad Zaheer spent in Pakistan. He narrates, cracks jokes and thrice his eyes fill with tears of the sacrifices made, the work done, the changes that seemed a possibility, the social, political, economic change that had seemed within reach and had vanished like a whiff of perfume.

I hold his hand, console him, try to make him believe that the fight continues, that the war goes on; Diep rushes in and makes coffee; we sit and laugh at the anecdotes he narrates, Diep informs him about the work she is doing; the small changes that she is trying to make. He smiles a bit sadly, appreciates her work but both me and Diep know that in his heart he does not believe either in charity or in social work as an instrument for a sustainable change. He leaves in an hour and both of us sit in a vacuum before Diep remembers the evening dinner.

Somebody nudges me and I turn around. She is looking at me with her eyes full of contempt. I know Diep is hurt by Rauf chacha's very obvious dislike for service on a personal level. I get up and stand at the door of Diep's kitchen; we are both silent for a while. "In the absence of a mass based party there is no one to fight for the rights of the people, stand up for the woman being abused, the poor being oppressed. The NGO's are trying to fill that gap."

"But the comrades do not understand this. They refuse to acknowledge us and on the other hand they themselves are so factionalized with each group claiming to be the real communist party. Are the masses to be left on their own while these factions fight and quarrel amongst themselves trying to prove who is the 'authentic comrade'?"

I sigh and turn away. What can I say? I am myself attached to a communist party that has committed so many blunders that it is no longer a party with a mass base; sometimes it has dilly dallied for so long that the opportunity was lost; but one cannot give up the need for a political party that on the face of it at least stands with humanity and equality. Women like me stay with the party not because it is the best party but because as a Marxist I need to show that I stand away from the right wingers.

'You have a point but it difficult to make Diep understand that you do not agree with other comrades.'

"I wish Diep would not be judgmental and treat me as an individual."

"You could try explaining to her."

"We need to talk politics"

"Everyone needs to talk politics; that is what Comrade P.C.Joshi said."

She leaves me wondering how long she has been around. P.C.Joshi said this in the forties and as far as I can remember it has never been reproduced in the bourgeois press. She turns and smiles as if at my thoughts and I walk back to the kitchen where Diep seems to have thawed because she is talking to herself; a sure sign of a woman gathering her thoughts and coming to terms with the world around her.

Evening dinner is delightful; so many people comfortable in each other's company can restore one's faith in peace and gain respect for people like Diep who are constantly fighting for values that would ensure peace and humanity. I meet Zakia again who has read some of my short stories. We talk about some of the characters and she shares with me the pain of having a divorced daughter; a result of mismatched cultures, the girl brought up to be polite, well-mannered and soft spoken, the boy who used abuses as punctuations even in love-making. "isn't there a basic flaw with arranged marriages; the girl and the boy never meet freely to judge each other." I ask tentatively. Zakia sighs and says, "that is how it happens here." And that is how it shall continue to happen; the conservative among us shall continue to curse fate and the progressive shall continue to blame the society but neither shall make a move to trust the younger generation, empower them to take their own decisions and make their own mistakes. I wonder when the younger generation in South Asia would begin rebelling.

Twice Neelam Bhasheer Ahmed is mistaken for me and gets the compliments; we wink at each other and later together we put the gentlemen in place and have a great laugh: once in a while women get an opportunity to laugh at men in their faces. Women have faced this for so long and have joined men in laughing at themselves or their sisters, but men do not. These two turn grim, do not apologize for their mistake and leave early. Both me and Neelam laugh again. From somewhere echoes her voice, "How should I live if I do not laugh at myself." I nod in agreement.

As usual the discussion turns to democracy and the elections in India due in May. One gentleman wants BJP to come in power because their earlier tenure had been beneficial for the Indo Pak relations. I point out Pokhran and Kargil; he says that in retaliation Pakistan also had made the bomb which was good for Pakistan. Other Pakistanis attack him before I can, but such people are every-where and they are gaining ground which is worrisome.

I am to leave next day, and I begin sorting my bags after the party with Diep's instructions from downstairs punctuating the packing. Diep is a 'future teller'. Seeing the number of books that I have been gifted she has brought two large cardboard cartons from office. I fill them up wondering how on earth am I going to carry them upstairs to my third floor flat.

"I am sure Surdhani shall find a way."

"Yes, if she can take on the Indian and Pakistan customs she can certainly tackle two cartons of books." I agree with her.

She is lying on my bed which is strewn with gifts, souvenirs, books and clothes. I suddenly long to cuddle up to her. "No, I am not having a sexuality rethink at fifty five." I say hurriedly in case she misinterprets my thoughts.

She laughs, a soft laughter warm and understanding "I wouldn't think that ever."

"Why? do you think I am asexual?"

"I think you are confused."

"About my sexuality?"

"No-o! About the role that it should play in one's life. You have allowed partners to do your thinking; you packed and shelved your own intellect for so long that you lost the opportunity to tell men that they were wrong in their perception, analysis and conclusions. A long time becomes a habit which can be addictive."

"For someone who has left me so alone in this trip as to make me feel ignored you seem to have formed very firm opinions without solid ground."

"Observation is a strong basis for conclusions."

“Ok, so I have been under watch.”

“I would not say that; actually----.”

“I think you have overstayed the welcome and should leave.”

She looks hurt but smiles as she gets up, “I know you do not want to but we shall meet again.”

I speed up the packing, change and smile cynically. So much for wanting to cuddle up into a loving embrace! “Well everyone has a right to make stupid demands” I console myself as I turn to sleep or is it she who is still around and is reading my thoughts.

Diep accompanies me to the border. Friends and relatives have to say goodbye at the marble steps that lead up to the door of the building where security checks are done, passports are stamped, and visitors are safely seen across the large hall that opens to the other side. But Diep makes her own rules, waves aside my goodbye, looks straight into the eyes of the soldier at the door and walks in with me. On the first table my passport is checked. The young soldier does not try to hide the fact that he is comparing my photograph with my face; he looks up and down five times and I brace myself. What could be wrong now? But Diep knows what to do. “Yes she wears a Bindi and then she does not!” Oh, so I forgot to put a bindi this morning. The soldier hands me back my passport; I move but Diep doesn’t. I turn back and find her speaking sternly to the fellow “She is a guest in our country. Now she is leaving. The least that you can do is smile.” I pull her away and whisper “Why Diep? The fellow has probably been instructed to behave coldly to Indians.”

“All the more reason that Pakistani civilians should tell him that we resent such behavior with guests.”

That is my Diep; warm, caring, loving for individuals but equally concerned for society and humanity. A quick parting hug and she is gone. I wait for her to exit from the door; she does not turn back to wave and vanishes without glancing back. I know she will now head for her office or the slum where she works, or accompany a woman to the police station. Her responsibility towards me is over and she has much more important work to do. I cross my arms over my chest to preserve the warmth of her embrace in my bosom.

A line from Ismat Chughtai reaches out to me “So close is Pakistan that one would be heard if one shouts; why is that Pakistan now thousands of miles away?”

I shall make the journey again, however far it may be. Fare thee well neighbor with your new-found democracy; I go back to India to throw my weight with the struggle to keep the rightist forces in check. They are threateningly close to winning power; if they do we shall have to expand and intensify the struggle. It shall be a long tough fight, but who is afraid of embarking on the road that leads to humanity.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER ONE

It is pitch dark outside. I tentatively step out of the light zone while my Passport is being Xeroxed and the room card computer punched. An eerie silence greets me. What else at 2.30 in the morning? And then in the dark a white form emerges swooping on the horizon brought so close by the absence of light. It moves as if suspended and seems to become still. Black has so many shades I discover as my eyes get used to sifting the dark. The sea gull has just flown from one mangrove cluster to another that now becomes clearer and is dotted with white specks. Sea gulls are said to be personal in their choice of sleep cycle. As my eyes decipher contours of dark, I caress with my eyes the ones dotting the mangroves for having decided to invest in insomnia.

Pakistan International Airlines, the one I was scheduled to take to reach Karachi from Lahore had gone on a flash strike. While people around me were grumbling for the six hours wasted as Air Blue accommodates us, I have a warm feeling of solidarity. It is on! The mass struggle continues. Little bits of information trickle in; the strike is across all sections of employees, from pilots to loaders. People are predicting that it would not last two days; they know that big money would soon be able to break the workers unity. And why would they not know? They have lived under the same colonial rule as we have, they know how feudalism was nurtured for governance and that independence transferred power not into the hands of the people but to the moneyed lords who think, live and behave as their masters before them. The dark of our times is jet black and for people like me these labour struggles are zones of light. I buy myself a cup of coffee.

The crossing had been interesting as always. The Indian side had decided to turn me into a toddler, made me wait a good half an hour before administering the Polio drops. I am entering a country where religion is at loggerheads with Polio preventive drops claiming that they are a ploy of the western world aimed at causing sterility and hence reducing the population of Muslims. India has eradicated Polio and can now openly gloat about it by making Indian travelers wait forever at the border while the preventive vaccine is brought out of the refrigerator, thawed and administered. I am carrying books as always and swim through the checks. The bus, much more dilapidated in the last two years deposits me at the gate of the Pakistani customs. Within a few minutes the security check is over, my Passport stamped, and I am 'all ready with nowhere to go.' That is what my situation is. Between my last visit and now there has been a bomb blast on the Pakistan side of the border and one of the security measures taken is no vehicles allowed within two kilometres of the border. I am told by the very polite customs officer that there is a ferry train that I shall have to board to reach the point from where someone can pick me up. There is no way I can communicate with the Oxford University Press and tell them where I am and how long I shall have to wait. I know someone shall come to pick me up, hopefully give me lunch and allow me the use of their mobile to contact a few friends in Lahore. The roads outside the customs are clean, newly tarred and traffic less. Roads I realize have no existence unless someone is walking them. They are just there, not reaching out to someone, not going anywhere; lifeless entities. I load my bags on a trolley and move to a shaded bench that is giving way to the sun moving westwards. The ferry train is nowhere in sight. I begin talking to another lady waiting for the ferry. I do not see the rails anywhere and I wonder if I am waiting at the right point. The lady, Nafisa as she has introduced herself laughs and says 'one doesn't need rails for this train.' I am perturbed but she does not enlighten me adding mischievously

“wait and see.” I also ask how long it would take to come. Nafisa smiles and says as soon as the driver and helper are done with the 3Ns- Namaz, Nutrition and Nap. There are two trains and they should be shuttling in opposite direction since Pakistanis also have to board it to reach the customs. But only one train functions and so it waits at one end till there are some passengers before leaving for the other end. Nafisa is an artiste from Pakistan and is coming back after participating in an exhibition in Delhi. We talk of art and the varied results of South Asian art having made a space in the world market which has led to a number of art galleries, created many artistes and curators and where all this could lead as far as art is concerned? Would a good market ensure quality art or only mass production?

I stare at a large caterpillar crawling down the road and fumble for my spectacles in the neckline of my kurta where I normally tuck it. Nafisa smirks loudly saying “Do not bother, it shall get closer.” And it does! The ferry train is like a toy train plying every children’s park for the ones not daring enough to take the roller coaster rides. Only this one has small rubber wheels and does not move on rails. The caterpillar ferry has five bogies, seats twenty but we are only two. Thankfully Nafisa has a lot of baggage mainly crates of paintings and all of that is piled into two ‘bogies’ while we sit in the third. Halfway through Nafisa’s mobile becomes functional and she is gracious enough to allow me a call to the Oxford University Press contact person. Aziz poor fellow has been waiting with a car for the last two hours. He immediately calls up my friends who have been calling him [read pestering] for my whereabouts and when I finally reach him he informs me that my friends shall be reaching OUP office in an hour and that lunch has been arranged for all of us. I am flattered by the way OUP and Karachi Literature Festival look after its Indian guests.

I walk around the OUP office, which occupies a three story building, with an outlet on the ground floor and other management departments on the other two floors. There are women all around. An organization headed by a liberal progressive woman in the natural course creates an atmosphere that makes space for women. Aziz leaves me with a group of young women working for OUP and vanishes to arrange for food. The girls have no clue why I am there and turn into a bunch of mynahs on learning that I am from India. The excitement about India is heartwarming though disorienting; India is right across the border, isn’t it? It has people with similar features, skin colour, culture and speak the same languages. Joy in South Asia manifests itself in food and I am persuaded to join them for lunch with noodles, parathas and tandoori chicken piling up on my plate. It is mid-afternoon and I suddenly realize that I have only had a cup of wood polish smelling airport coffee since morning and that I am hungry enough to eat the books lining the walls. I am halfway through when Aziz turns up with delectable sheermals and chicken curry. Thankfully Sayeeda Diep, Mahboob Akhtar and Sehar sahib turn up just then. Good food, friends and books all around, could one ask for anything else?

Diep is her usual loving self. She is one woman who hugs without inhibitions of dress, hairdo and make up. She herself dresses simply in soft creaseless linen that is abundantly produced in Pakistan, hair pulled back in a ‘no nonsense’ bun, and a scrubbed face with smiling lips and bright eyes. I have seen women smoothing their dresses and hair after one of her embraces. But she doesn’t care and neither do I. Women almost never heartily hold each other close; even the proverbial European greeting with pecks on the cheeks is a mere formality. Diep holds one to let you hear her heart beating with love and warmth.

She also suffers from several ailments and has to restrict her diet. One of the reason why I took her to eat at the Communist Party Commune where she relished the watery dal and bland vegetables and loved the atmosphere where the Party General Secretary and Polit Bureau members ate with the rest of the comrades. Diep cannot eat the rich chicken curry and without any demur picks up a piece of the sheermal and nibbles it to keep me company.

Mahboob Akhtar has left the Pakistan Civil Services and now runs his own business. He eats slowly. I understand that he has eaten for the day but does not want me to be lonely at my first meal in this city. When we finish I open my bag and present Diep with a copy of my latest book. Diep had particularly asked me to give her a copy on arrival and I had kept one outside the packed carton. I am a bit embarrassed for not presenting one to Mahboob sahib, who nonchalantly calls his driver and arranges for the book to be photocopied. Multanis are said to be difficult to please but if they have made up their minds to be a friend then it is equally hard to offend them.

Seher Sahib on the other hand is a Mohajir and carries the baggage of being an outsider trying to strike roots. He has selected political analysis as the means to find a place for himself in the Punjab province of Pakistan. He has been a journalist, had his fair share of opportunities to discuss and comment on the political scenario but is completely indifferent to the fact that politics has a life of its own and makes its own journey. Most people insist on filling me in with anecdotes about Abba and the past rather than informing me about the present turmoil. South Asia has been in a state of flux for more than a century now. The continuous churning and turmoil have taken their toll and politics is rife with tribal enmities, religious identities, language differences and cultural diversity. Unfortunately for the region people are still interested in events rather than the reasons that led to them and the fall outs. Colonization has changed our angle of looking back. We focus on dates and personalities rather than on extempore movements and the way they changed the life of the masses. Seher sahib is a bit put out at not getting an original copy of the book though Mahboob sahib has, without being asked got a photocopy made for him as well; he now embarks on a long narration of how Comrade Hasan Nasir had been tortured in Lahore Fort. He does not know that I visited the fort last time. The torture cells are way too deep inside. I look at him in disbelief as he narrates how the screams rent the thick walls of the fort and were heard outside. I do not believe both: that Hasan Nasir was tortured in the open to make his screams heard outside the boundary walls of the large fort or that he screamed so loud as to rent the walls. It is sickening how these gory details are repeated with lip smacking and self-adulation because of some remote connection one had with the Left that had provided the only martyrs one could glorify in the last two centuries. The way these stories are narrated remind me of the way husbands narrate incidents of domestic abuse of women of their own family with chuckles and giggles interlaced with disgust and sorrow.

Diep being the sensitive woman that she is understands my discomfiture and takes things in her hand. On my way back, I shall be staying with her for two days. She decides this waving away Mahboob sahib's insistence that I be his guest. She also insists that OUP do their duty to their guest and drop me at the airport and arranges for Mahboob sahib to pick me up on my way back and drop me at her place. I look at her admiringly for managing it so well and she, catching my eye winks without losing the serious, 'I am the boss' expression!

Couple of hours later it is time for me to proceed to the airport. We shall be meeting soon so the parting is happy and full of promise. I am dropped at the airport two hours before the flight which turns into an eight hour wait. A flash strike by PIA is the most unexpected bonus I could have expected. Coffee in hand I walk up to the person who should be loading the bags through the security check. He is standing idle; most of the bags have been sent in. But the airbus that should have taken us to Karachi is still not in. The fellow looks around to confirm that it is him I am addressing, seems a bit surprised then tries to cover it up and nods his head; yes he is part of the strike but is here to keep track of anyone attending work on the sly.

“You think there can be dark horses?”

“Best to take care.” He replies with a smile. “This strike is not going to clinch matters. The management shall buy away some leaders, break the unity and get things moving in a couple of days. Another showdown in the form of another strike shall happen soon. When it does it is best to be aware of the ones who let us down in this one.”

“I was told that PIA has been plan-fully under-performing so that it can be termed a sick Public Sector Unit, and sold to the highest bidding multi-national.”

“We have been trying to fight that at our level, to keep it a viable PSU”

“It is happening everywhere. Capitalism is eating up everything that socialism tried to construct in a people’s friendly set up” If he had been surprised by me walking up to converse with him, he had hidden it well. But this round is tough to cover up and his incredulity at my knowing the political ‘isms’ is obvious. Why do people continue to believe that women and politics are like oil and water? I wonder how many women are participating in this strike? Did they join willingly? Are they aware of the stakes and the fall outs? PIA must have at least twenty percent women employees; are they represented in the leadership? Are they consulted before major decisions are taken?” I turn to the young man “I am also told that the golden handshake was offered and accepted.”

“If it was it has not trickled down to employees like us. But the question is not about receiving a lot of money in one go. The rich look down on labour and hence presume that anyone who does not have to work for a living has got the best deal. It is not. An easy life is about the desire to work and having a job where this desire is fulfilled.”

I want to hug this young man; he is a worker. Does the leadership of trade unions realize that work is a need as important as food, shelter, clothing? That workers do not like to sit idle and that is why ‘shut downs’ have remained a weapon in the hands of owners. Sooner or later a worker gets fed up of twiddling his thumbs just as much as he is worried about his hungry family. Or does the trade union leadership which is very much part of the bourgeois set up, believe that negotiating a deal is all about a bigger financial exchange. Why hasn’t the leadership been handed over to workers? Shouldn’t they be taking the lead in what is fundamentally their war? But then why doesn’t the leadership of farmers movements belong to the peasants; why so few women members in the central committee and Polit

Bureau and why almost no women candidates fielded during elections? This is the condition of the Left all over South Asia; it is the dual edged patriarchy where the obvious exists with the subtle.

There is a sudden commotion around me and I realize that the alternative flight is being announced for boarding. I turn to say goodbye to the young man but he has vanished. Passport and boarding pass in hand I join the queue.

I walk up to the person standing with KLF placard at Karachi Airport and say I am from India; he looks me up and down, takes in my sari, bindi and disheveled appearance and questions "To attend KLF?" "Actually no! I am here to gather seashells from the Karachi sea shore" I long to say this but Lucknowite that I am I only nod my head. He nods me to the bus and continues to stand. After a while I inquire if there is any other participant he is expecting? "There is one Noor Zaheer on this flight. He has not come yet"

"Noor Zaheer is a 'she' and I am inside the bus. Can we leave now?" he does not comprehend. The younger generation has gone quite dumb; the driver, an older man explains to him and he bangs the door shut in anger. We drive to the city and I am dropped at the hotel reception.

The room is large, the hotel beside the sea, the city after three visits has begun to open itself to me, the event holds a promise of meetings with many writers and interesting sessions, many friends and comrades shall arrive much before the inauguration; I know I shall not waste the few hours left till dawn in sleep. I sift through the Karachi Literature Festival Bag given to delegates. The Parker Pen, delegate card, programme and delegate book goes in my handbag, the rest I shall read at leisure. The writing table is big, has a lamp and thankfully does not have a huge mirror. The management obviously belongs to the old school that does not like 'two in one' where a writing table doubles up as a dressing table. I sit down to think some and write a bit. Karachi winter nights have a velvety chill so pleasant after Delhi's dry, biting cold.

Friends I'll meet, more friends I'll make, but a list of places to visit has to be made. The Pakistan Government has been generous with the visa, I can visit Larkana and Jamshoro besides Lahore and Karachi. But time is limited, only twelve days, so planning must be good. Fortunately, Aslam is free for ten of them and willing to accompany me. I know I'll probably not visit as many places, meet as many people as I plan; some desires shall be forsaken for future fulfillment or to remain as regrets. But as my mother would often quote to console herself:

Yarab dua-e-vasl na hargiz qubool ho

phir dil me kya rahega jo hasrat nikal gai

Lord let not my prayer for fulfilment be accepted

What shall reside in my heart if this be accepted

CHAPTER TWO

Someone pokes me. I hate being poked but before I can be angry my body begins groaning. Why do I never remember not to doze off on a sofa especially with my legs folded under me? I uncurl slowly, testing each muscle. Stretch to my full height and more, thank my yoga teacher for keeping me together at 58 and look around for the person who had poked me. The sun is shining outside, perhaps it is one of its rays that nudged me awake. Sifting through my suitcase I decide against the Kanjivaram sari I had brought for the inauguration and settle for a Tangail, a cotton sari from Bengal. I walk down and smiling volunteers guide me to an extended jetty into the sea where breakfast is laid out. Plate in hand I am reaching out for the fruit when a flat narrow boat, pulled by eight beautiful women glides across. 'They are training for the Kerala Boat Festival' a voice informs me. I must have been looking aghast for the gentleman to talk to an unknown woman; this is not a sight one would expect to see in Pakistan. I give my head a vigorous shake, angry at myself for letting the accepted 'stereotype' overpower my vision. The gentleman invites me to his table where his pretty wife Shahnaz is seated. We get talking about the rise of literature festivals and the purpose they serve, just as another boat of eight men crosses. He smiles and says I should take a photograph; it is rare to find eight Pakistani men working unitedly. But isn't it the case all over South Asia? And we begin discussing the way great works of literature and philosophy have all been solitary works and the absence of community or group outputs. Other friends join; Kishwar Naheed who has forgotten me in the last three years, but what the heck she is still my Kishwar Apa, the poet of 'Ham Gunahgar Aurten', so what if I have to reintroduce myself again and she nods her head with a vague look of resignation; 'seventies' in one's life can be the decade of keeping pace or letting go.

This hotel is a Parsi establishment. All through my childhood and youth I have had several close associations with Parsis. Shirin Vajifdar, Dr. Mulk Raj Anand's partner had been instrumental in stabilizing my mind when it was oscillating between dance and academics. "Why choose? Just because most of dancers you have met are semiliterate? Explore the dance scene of Southern Indian; every dancer is educated and well read. Try and discover 'dancademics.' Dancers can be academicians." Parsis in India often talk of their relatives and friends in Pakistan. I heard how rich the Pakistani Parsis were, how their businesses were growing and how they were respected for their enterprise and hard work. The Parsis in India are still smarting from the Morarji Desai era when he as the Chief Minister of Bombay had cracked down on alcohol sale, largely controlled by the Parsis and withdrawn permits. Morarji Desai had also made permits mandatory for anyone wishing to drink alcohol successfully shutting down all

bars and putting a lid on the illicit supply of liquor. And the Parsi who doesn't need his 'chhota peg' every evening does not exist.

I stand near the edge of the jetty taking in the sun, the sea and the warmth of the atmosphere; Founded by Dinshaw Avari in 1948, Beach Luxury Hotel is the first in the chain of hotels that the Avari clan has built in Pakistan and Dubai. Both in India and in Pakistan Parsis have tapped areas that were lying unexplored with the Midas touch. I watch admiring not just the hotel but the idea of extending into the sea a huge jetty that would give a different angle to the concept of enjoyment and merrymaking. Someone quite close coughs politely. I turn to meet the bright smiling eyes at a comfortable level where I do not have to look up or down. A man of my height, slim, pale faced with slightly long hair extends his card. I dig for mine, he takes it but without glancing at it says "Welcome Dr. Zaheer to Beach Luxury Hotel. I am the owner." He looks too young to be the owner but then Parsis have this knack of looking young when they are in their fifties and then suddenly looking eighty plus when they cross to sixty. He is also called Dinshaw like his grandfather. I extend my hand and his smile broadens as he clasps it in his strong grip. I take an instant liking because I like people who hold mine and give their full hand. It has an acceptance that 'finger touch' can never give. He tells me his wife is from India and I tell him the number of relatives I have in Pakistan. I so wish to have a long discussion with him, there is so much I wish to know from a rich Parsi; how does a minuscule entity survive the rising fundamentalism of the majority community? Parsis have been under attack in Pakistan and his other hotel the Avari Towers in Karachi had received threats of a terrorist attack some years back when The Marriot was attacked. There are questions related to religious and social baggage. How does a rigid minority that insists on intermarrying survive? I know cousin marriage in Islam are not just accepted, they are promoted; such arrangements among Parsis would not be laughed at as they are in India. But aren't the educated Parsis waking up to genetic malfunctioning because of high rate of internal cohabitation? But discussion on religious beliefs is taboo all over South Asia; religion is to be accepted and never debated.

In India we are almost two years down in the rule of an openly Rightist party. Changes have begun and shall gather momentum and speed. Some Facebook friends from Pakistan have said as much "do not become like us, please" I have not dared to tell them that it is not my choice, but probably my destiny, we have the same cycle and we too like you have not given up on feudalism.

The jetty is filling up and I get up to leave. I know Aslam and some other comrades must have arrived by now. I throw the last bit of sausage at a grey sea gull floating at a distance but the larger white one, a male obviously is quicker than her. So much for female unity! Crossing the main open area where the inauguration would be held I am shown the way by Aslam's loud voice, demanding my room number and explaining that he must see me before the formalities begin. I walk up, and his long thin arms hold me in a tight embrace. Aslam does not conform to any norms and I am too involved trying to blink back tears and be the down to earth comrade. He is the younger brother I never had; he is the comrade Sindh has given me and the friend who believes in me. With him nearby I know I am home even amongst strangers. With him is G.M.Baloch, Gullu as we call him, a Baloch young man who smiles as he narrates stories of Baloch suffering. In my last visit when I had met him for the first time he had strangely enough reminded me of Comrades from Vietnam. Why, I had wondered then and now? He is fair with a touch of pink, solidly built with not even a whiff of the Mongol features. Why does he remind me of the

Vietnamese? Gullu begins to tell me about his library that he and some friends have opened in Orangi, a predominantly Urdu speaking, Bihari populated area with some Baloch and Pathan pockets. This is a neighbourhood known for its gang fights; this is where Parveen Rahman was killed for challenging the might of the clergy and land mafia. I look at him, proud that he has chosen learning as a weapon to challenge fundamentalism and it suddenly clicks! He smiles as he talks of the suffering of Baloch, of the poor, of the women; he smiles because he believes in the success of peoples struggle and that is how the Vietnamese did too: 'if USA wants we shall fight for twenty years!' Words of the smiling Comrade Li Bau echo in my ears. He was my father's close friend and as the first ambassador of Vietnam to India had done away with protocol going around visiting friends riding a bicycle. I was eleven years old then and his warmth had created a special place for the Vietnamese fight for independence. It is not features that define a race; it is the willingness to continue the struggle for justice and to not give up till it is won. My belief would most certainly be rejected by the anthropologists.

Aslam took charge of the carton of my books published in India. OUP has been kind enough to allow their sale from its pavilion. I am a bit embarrassed about the number of titles and copies I have brought but Aslam guarantees that they would be sold by tomorrow evening. Gullu calculates the price of each one in Pakistani rupees, subtracts the rebate and concessions KLF would offer, then adds up the total and takes a receipt from the person who has come to carry them down to the OUP stall as I rush down to attend the inauguration.

Pervez Hoodbhoy is scheduled to give the Keynote address and nothing can keep me away. Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy is a Pakistani nuclear physicist, mathematician and activist; an outspoken upholder of rationality he is continuously under attack. He has an open offer to teach from various universities in Europe and the United States of America and he does travel round the globe. His friends advise him to leave, his enemies would be happy to see his back, but he refuses to leave Pakistan. Is he on a death wish? I think not. He is seated in the first row in the area marked for the inauguration. I look at the back of his head, the neck and the shoulders. I do not need to see his face to know that there is a calm of a being who knows he is in the right and is under attack just for this. There is the confidence of one who walks the path he has chosen rejecting the one destiny had allotted him. Yes, brick bats, abuses, loneliness and unhappiness shall be his lot but with that would also be the assurance that he was himself the decision maker; one who did not cow down before powers that be.

The pattern for the inauguration has been announced and Ameena Sayeed gets up to speak. I am here because of a chance meeting with her at the International Book Fair in Delhi in 2015. In the meeting I had suggested that Ismat Chughtai's autobiography "Kaghazi Hai Pairahan" should be translated to English and she had immediately agreed making it a 'book to be done' the same year. It was to be released in the KLF this year.

Ameena Saiyid became the head and managing director of Oxford University Press in Pakistan becoming the first woman to ever head a multinational company in Pakistan. In a way she is a trail blazer, navigating her way through an ocean of publishing, taking decisions that proved right, winning her respect and assuring her the position of authority. Now she briefly traced the history of the OUP presence in the publishing scene of Pakistan where it has included Urdu besides English as a language

and mentioned with regret how she has yet not been able to persuade the Head Office to change their policy and allow her to include fiction.

Ameena is most unlike a CEO of the foremost publishing house. She is always dressed in a simple salwar kameez, her face is well scrubbed with no make-up, has bobbed hair that need no styling, is of medium height and on the plumper side. She is not intimidating nor is she overtly friendly and gushing. Talking to her one has the sense of someone who not only knows her job but is also deeply passionate about it. She is not into publishing because she can make a lot of money or be in a powerful position; she is there because that is where she wants to be. In 2010 Ameena founded and organized the Karachi Literature Festival - the first literary festival of its kind to be held in Pakistan. It was her insistence that the KLF should feature not just Pakistani writers but also have representation from India and Bangladesh. The first was a resounding success and KLF soon became an event that citizens of Karachi plan and look forward to, where publishers exhibit and sell and writers and literary agents discuss deals over coffee.

Last year I had been won over by Ameena's 'no nonsense' attitude. She was introduced quite casually by another publisher at the Delhi World Book Fair, and as she later admitted, had too many things on her mind. She was polite enough, but that was it. An hour later exiting the gate I check my mobile and it showed several missed calls from the same number. A Book Fair is not the best place to be vigilant about one's mobile that rings unnecessarily with the usual promotional calls. I call back and she picks up almost immediately, apologizes and admits that she did not connect me with me. We laugh and she asks me where I am, asks me to hold put and ten minutes later is walking outside the gate dragging her wheeled suitcase behind her. She has no qualms about sitting on a raised platform under a tree and we discuss work. We fix up a meeting again at the Book Fair to thrash out the deal for the translation of Ismat Chughtai's autobiography "Kaghazi Hai Pairahan". She turns up with her daughter and I immediately warm up to her. As a child I had often tagged along with Ammi to her meetings and seminars and I always see her in women who treat work, family and themselves as a single whole.

Shyama the daughter is a dancer and wants to keep adding to her skill and repertoire. She wishes to come to India for short visits and be in touch with one Guru who can guide her as and when she can get a visa to visit India. Why is it so difficult for a Pakistani to be tutored in India? Kathak Kendra is full of students from Europe, United States and even Korea and China; but we refuse the same facilities to Pakistanis. On the other hand, Pakistan has closed its doors on all art forms making it exceedingly difficult for dancers, musicians to perform and teach in Pakistan. Artistes either give up on their medium or migrate to the west. I have this strong feeling that the governments of both the countries work extensively hard on making their own citizens unhappy. I offer to introduce Shyama around, she offers to get us coffee. We are three women who understand each other, our work and our love for coffee. The meeting would have been successful anywhere on earth.

Ameena does not give a long speech and it is followed by a short condolence speech on the demise of Intezar Hussain the foremost fiction writer of Pakistan who passed away the day before. It is Asif Aslam who delivers this speech. He had been particularly close to Intezar Hussain his mentor and he is obviously emotionally upset by this duty. Ameena quickly takes charge after the condolence, formally thanks everyone present, then moves on to invite Pervez Hoodbhoy to deliver the keynote address. My

respect for her goes up several notches; she is the balanced mix of eastern emotionalism and western practicality.

Hoodbouy's keynote address is about the rise of the Rightist Forces in South Asia and his immediate concern is the sustained consolidation of the fascist forces in India, the increasing communalism, the growing distance between the minorities and the majority community, the undefined insecurity, the absence of a joint effort by liberal, progressive forces, the lethargy of the Left. It is a year and nine months since the right wing won a landslide victory in India. Since then war jingoism is on the rise on both sides and Hoodbouy rightly points out at the wiping out of the people to people discourse when fascism takes control. People on both sides of the border love their writers, singers, poets, actors and the rest. They work on this love and acceptance of each other grows and just when it seems to become a reality some despot or the other decides to indulge in war jingoism. Not to lag behind the other side does not wait and watch, it reacts equally harshly and all music, art, poetry, visa liberalization is chucked down the drain.

It is strange that most of the refugees from either side have neither become communal nor do they treat the country of their origin as enemy-land. Yet the partition of the Indian sub-continent has been very successfully used by the Right-wing forces in both the countries. I often wonder where and when was the 'Akhand Bharat' the saffron brigade talks about? When did it exist? Who ruled it? The British, who would have extended the British empire up to Afghanistan had not the Afghans been unconquerable. Then would the saffron brigade extend the 'Akhand Bharat' to Iran border?

Hoodbouy's apprehensions are my fears; because as a Marxist; I can foresee the development of fascism from communalism? Or is it that being a Muslim, I know I am their target and hence am insecure? No, it is because I do not wish to lose the pride I had in a diverse, secular India, in a Constitution that guarantees equality and allows for changes in the social set up, where questioning, arguing and dissenting is considered intelligence and where peaceful coexistence is a way of life.

I so wish to meet Hoodbouy, just hold his hand and say "we fight on the same fronts my friend, yes these battles have reached us a bit late, but they are there, so let us get down to fighting against them together. Let us launch a people versus state war, let us take on the fundamentalists, their fake enmity and their real unity as they stand as a force against us because we the people define the nation and not a vain, muscle flexing state. Alas it is not to be. Hoodbouy is mobbed after his speech. Aslam assures me that he shall be here all the days and that it would be better to talk to him then when he has more time on hand. He doesn't come on the other days. I have often regretted my decision to listen to men when I should have heard the voice of my instincts. Missing Hoodbouy is another addition to the list.

But there is hardly time to think and reflect. The inauguration over, the sessions begin and the first one is right there.

Arfa Syeda Zehra, eminent educationist, gender specialist and chairperson of the National Commission for Women, Pakistan, is in conversation with Laxmi Narayan Tripathi on 'Dilemmas of a Transgender'. She waits as Laxmi applies lipstick, touches up her mascara and arranges the pallu of her sari over her shoulder. Laxmi is beautiful, 'she' because that is what she has decided to be- born a boy in the

patriarchal set up of East Uttar Pradesh, she was able to persuade her Brahmin family that she was a woman caught in a male body. As she rattles on about her journey I wonder at the voyage her immediate family decided to take on; the sacrifices that they made, at the very least the cash they gave up on which would have come to them as dowry, the embarrassment in a society that considers it fortunate to possess an asset and looks down upon people with liabilities; this is the manner in which educated people discuss children; but what about the one who was an asset, decided to change into a liability and became neither!

People around are there more for the fun of it, giggles and smirks, a couple of suppressed catcalls, Arfa Apa takes charge, shuts everyone up and tries to concentrate on the interview though one can see that Laxmi is quite enjoying the mislaid and rather inappropriate attention. My mind runs away in another direction: this is her autobiography, what would she be writing now. In my ears echo the words of the well-known Hindi writer Shivmurti: the time to write an autobiography is when you have nothing to look forward to and can only look back. She has already looked back---so now what? I suppose she shall find what to do with herself and how to make herself useful in society. What does she work on? But she is not asked these questions which would make her think about the world she belongs to, rather she is being hedged into questions which attempt to burst the bubble of the world that she has created around her; here she is very capable of protecting herself, because this is what she has done all her life--save herself! I wonder if she has friends who can advise her to use her victories in a manner that creates a meaningful role for her in a society that at least on the face of it seems to accept her as an individual.

I get the answer the very next day when Maniza Naqvi on the breakfast table begins to deride Laxmi as a person who has sought a sex change on the accepted lines of a female with big breasts, red lips and the rest. Even when a person in a weaker section manages to fight and emerge as a personality, the social set up expects them to make the choices which would please the 'liberators.' If they are questioning the scales of femininity then a person reaching out for sex change should be doing just that. No one stops to think that this is what she might desire- a big bust and fluttering eyes; that this is her definition of womanhood and what is important is her freedom and not the conformation to neo-feminism! Anyway, more about Maniza Naqvi later.

We were coming back to attend a session from the food court when Laxmi called out to me. I was surprised. Who remembers meetings that happen in protests. It was while protesting for equal opportunities to LGBTQs at Jantar Mantar that I had met her. She had spoken about the possibility of so many professions open to transgenders whom she insists on calling 'Hijras'. I had in my speech contradicted her saying why should society be given the right to select what was a right profession for a Hijra? Why shouldn't the Hijra decide what she wanted to do and then work to make herself good at it or change professions if she didn't like it. Some in the crowd had begun to weep while a few had embraced me. I still remember the snug, body hugging clasp. Later, she had come up and taken a selfie with me. Aslam, just a few steps behind came up and addressing her as Laxmi Didi introduced himself as my brother and Laxmi in turn addresses him as Bhai. Sometimes when people barge in like this, it seems as if they are being pushy or over bearing. Not so with Aslam; one can immediately feel the human connect that he wishes to establish with every other human being. I wonder if he is like this because he

is a Marxist or did he become a Marxist because he is seeking proximity with all humankind. I suppose this is one of the questions that match 'did the chicken come first or the egg?' Always to be wondered at but never answered.

CHAPTER THREE

He is smart in the eastern way; the Sindhi cap fits well, his shirt and shalwar are well ironed and of a soft green bordering on grey, the waistcoat fits well because he does not have a paunch and the shawl that he is wearing falls in folds like the Greek influenced Buddhist sculptures. His posture is erect in spite of his age and the struggle he has been through and his gaze piercing though warm. I know he is sizing me up and I wait. His smile breaks through his somewhat stiff demeanor and realizing that I have passed some kind of a test I hold out my hand.

There is a split second hesitation as Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali Talpur holds my hand with two fingers and a thumb. His smile broadens as he says, "Welcome to Karachi!" Now he brings out his other hand from the waistcoat pocket which also has a couple of fingers missing. Is he satisfied that I am not revolted by the absence of some fingers? He walks me to a nearby table, and a political discussion begins most naturally. It is as if we have known each other for a long time, had left off at some point and were now picking up threads without much ado. This is pleasure for me. I wonder why people do not have political discussion this way, interlaced with egg rolls, new books, friends walking by, waving greetings, exchanging small talk, laughter and information. Why has politics been made such serious business, confined to closed doors, seminar halls, symposiums when it should be running on the streets, dancing in parks and somersaulting in every household?

It is like recognizing each other. Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali begins talking about Balochistan and Sindh. I almost ask him what he a Sindhi was doing helping the Baloch rebels. "Just what your father a Lucknowite was doing in Pakistan or Che Guevara in Cuba and Bolivia", someone whispers in my ear. "So you are here". It is a statement because I knew she would be here. "Didn't you want me to be?" She says with a mock shocked expression. I must have smiled because Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali looks a bit surprised. He is telling me about the Long March undertaken from Quetta in Balochistan to Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan to highlight the atrocities of the Army and Government of Pakistan. It covered all the major cities of the country, held press conferences to create awareness at the neglect of the media and tried to raise consciousness about a people struggling for self-determination. He was telling me about the journey, the problems it faced in organizing, the difficulty but the necessity of having women in the group and about Mama Qadeer the leader and the brain behind the effort. That the March was brutalized several times by uniformed institutions and camouflaged goons was just something that happens in such endeavors. The Edhi Foundation had stood by the people of Balochistan, provided an ambulance that accompanied the March and that large gatherings in most of the towns and cities meant that the masses in Pakistan were beginning to at least acknowledge that Balochistan was an issue that had to be resolved. We exchange information on Kashmir and also the unrest in the North Eastern states of India. I tell him about Southern India and how the four states had been turned into five only to divert

the unity between the region that lay across the Vindhya mountain ranges. We are both a bit surprised at our lack of information about each other. Then he laughs and says, "We can blame the languages for this lack of communication." I agree and add "Ah! Language: the career and the barrier!" we both laugh, he mildly, in a dignified way, me with my usual embarrassingly loud guffaw.

No one passes by without acknowledging his presence or greeting him. The mark of a comrade involved at the very grass root level, one who has entrenched himself so deep within the community that he has become part of the stability that is the basis of its existence. Someone who does not fear storms because he knows that churning is the only way to realize that the best can surface only with struggle and that the duty of every revolutionary is to keep striving for the best. Revolutions cannot be given up because they have been successfully achieved, revolutions must continue because success is utopian; every generation should keep adding to the past achievement to make Rosa Luxemburg's theory of 'continuous revolution' a reality.

KLF has managed to keep an informal ambience. There is no entry ticket, people walk in and out of the festival area, a large portion is designated for food counters with portable tables and plastic chairs. Delegates have a separate eating space, but the public space is much more fun with people laughing, talking and recognizing each other, sharing cigarettes and stepping up to greet delegates. One should not compare but this is a festival in the real sense of the word- alive, vibrant and not full of snooty organizers, egoistic authors or fawning fans.

Me and Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali are joined by other friends. Some Baloch comrades walk up, followed by some Sindhi ones; we become a big group, tea appears and pakoras and then some sweets. Gullu points out that it is time for lunch and I should be moving to the reserved area for delegates. I am loathe to break the conversation; as if waiting in the wings for their queue, several plates of Biryani appear and are shared around. Who needs a twelve-course lunch when one can have friends instead?

It is evening and the sun is beginning to set when a short, thin extremely good- looking man appears. Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali stands up to shake his hand and the person turns to me "Comrade Noor?" whoever he is he must be important for people around seem to step back respectfully. I extend my hand nodding my head, he takes it smiles slightly and says "Lal Salaam! I am Lateef Mughal!" so this is the trade union leader Aslam had told me about; the one who is a comrade though he has always been in the People's Party of Pakistan; the one who had been very unwell for the last several years and for whom I had been asked to bring a life-saving drug which was forty times as expensive in Pakistan than it was in India and often not available. I get up hurriedly saying "I'll go up to my room and get your-----er--- -packet!" under the beautifully clipped mustaches his thin lips quiver to a sad smile. "Please sit! I have survived quite long without it; I suppose I can last a few minutes more. Comrade Noor has been kind enough to bring me some urgently needed medicine." He informs, and I feel a bit awkward at the gratitude, his and of the friends sitting with us.

I begin to recount the customs officer who managed to track the bottle of medicine in my suitcase and examined it for a long while. I longed to say the fellow "I have lived in Kullu and Kinnaur man, I know everything there is to know about hash, weed, cannabis and cocaine. This one is too small a bottle to get

me a profit; but who am I to talk logic to an officer? He wishes to open the bottle. I did not know whether it should be; maybe the seal should be intact. When I refuse he becomes even more doubtful and goes on to say that it is being confiscated and shall be released only when someone with a medical prescription gets a release order for it. I knew it would not be done or at least not done immediately. I also do not know how urgently the medicine is needed. Thankfully a doctor just behind me helps; he knows what the medicine is for, speaks for about full two minutes sprinkled generously with medical terms and the customs officer gets so bamboozled that he gives up hurriedly." There is a round of laughter and Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali smiles at me for covering up an awkward moment.

When I hand him the medicine Comrade Lateef Mughal quickly brings out dollars to pay me back. It is quite a bit of money and I wish I was rich enough to help-out friends who needed such expensive medicines. I make up my mind to talk to all my rich friends to lend a helping hand to sick comrades. I hand him back 25 dollars from the amount he has given me. One of Abba's teachings had been to form close bonds within the neighborhood. The pharmacist who brought this medicine especially for me got it through some contacts without paying taxes and so did not charge the quoted price from me. Expressed again Lateef Mughal's gratitude squeezes my heart. Why have such close neighbours moved away in opposite directions? Why haven't we got down to producing our own life saving drugs? Why are we privatizing medical and health care? Why is the right of the masses for work, food, clothing, shelter, education and health being sold over to the capitalists?

"Do not lose heart! It does not suit women!"

"All right for you to say this, but it seems like a lost battle"

"You must look at the brighter side"

"You mean I must be a hypocrite" I say this in a huff and walk away. This time round she is not showing me anything new; all she has been doing is pointing my short comings. I get this distinct feeling as if she is fed up and wishes to move on; a sense of a relationship that is prolonging but is over.

Aslam is introducing me to Wahid Baloch an activist and a comrade. He wishes me and stands quietly. Someone gets coffee and both of us sip it in silence. He is a tall, broad, hefty man, with a kind and gentle expression who seems a bit lost in his body. He is not a man of many words and we stand together watching people go by. Some greet him, others recognize me; it is a secure quiet, the one that is achieved from trust. I am surprised at myself; usually I take a while to get comfortable with strangers; here I have been companionably standing for quite a while without saying a word.

"One's comfort is defined by the expectation that other people have from you. The less they expect the more relaxed one would be." I must have looked shocked because she giggles and says "do cultivate another expression for this emotion. People around are glowering at poor Wahid Baloch thinking he has said something to shock you." "I am astounded! I have spent the major portion of my life fulfilling other people's expectations in the hope of finding a comfort zone." I am regretful at the years lost because I know that she is right. Maybe that is why society has built up these mountains of expectations for everyone to continue climbing and never reach the top.

“And also created other meanings for comfort; bank balance, large houses, caring family, when what one really needs is----.”

“-----people one can maintain a tranquil calm with.”

“But then such is the pressure of expectation that one does not notice the one who is there but is not communicating.”

“Do you mean yourself.” I ask a little guiltily. Has she always been around, and I have not noticed her. She only smiles as Aslam comes back with Hasan Mansoor and reclaims me. As we are beginning to move on Wahid Baloch says softly “I’ll be back tomorrow with a gift for you.”

I turn to him quickly “No please don’t; meeting all of you is such a pleasure, I really do not want a gift-----”

“Trust me, this is something that you will want.” And he is gone moving too fast for me to stop him. Aslam and Hasan Mansoor exchange glances; okay, this seems like a conspiracy. This is a bunch of young comrades; I am happy that their number increases with every visit; my heart warms every time I think of them; but I do not want them to spend on me. They however are men and I am a woman and a sister. There are too many fights elsewhere and it is best not to add to them.

Hasan Mansoor is a journalist and a short story writer. He has promised me a Sindhi meal. Try as I would last time I was unable to get proper Sindhi food. Just as here all outlets on the highways sell Punjabi Dhaba food, all urban hotels and restaurants stick to the usual non-descript stuff.

“You are overweight!” she nudges me

“And you are reading my thoughts. Do you realize that is a kind of eaves dropping?”

“Do you realize the number of times you succumb to patriarchy? Why poor ‘Eve’ ?”

Sehba Sarwar is a writer/editor working in the United States of America. She is also the daughter of Dr. Sarwar, one of the comrades who led the confrontation between the newly found state of Pakistan and the students in the early fifties. She is chairing a discussion on her compilation named ‘Borderlines’ next day and I am to participate in it. I had contributed an article on the Baul tradition of music from Bengal. I skip the formal dinner being hosted by some very rich businessman both to spend more time with friends in Karachi and to prepare for next day’s discussion.

It goes well the morning session, though rather thinly attended and I am free till next day. Jaffer Bilgrami I had met yesterday and today he has promised to take me to meet Dr. Adeeb Rizvi, the doctor who has opened the finest and the cheapest hospital for urinary disorders, Sindh Institute of Urology & Transplantation (SIUT). Since decades this institute is providing free treatment to all patient suffering from kidney diseases, including Dialysis, Transplant, Urology, etc. He is one of the rare doctors who have taken the Hippocratic oath to heart. Jaffer bhai became a friend through the Facebook; one of the Syed connections. When he heard of my coming visit to Karachi he asked me what plans I had in mind and if he could help. I had answered that I would so like to see Dr. Adeeb Rizvi; even if he has no time I would

like to just see him even from a distance. Jaffer bhai went offline and we didn't chat for four days. That is that, I thought to myself. Quite obviously Jaffer bhai has no connection with Dr. Rizvi and so was now avoiding me.

Five days on he came back and asked if I wished to meet Dr. Adeeb Rizvi and have a cup of tea with him. I thought he was joking. This was the most well-known and respected medical specialist of Pakistan, how would he have time for a cup of tea with me? But he seemed to be speaking in all seriousness and I said he could fix up any day after the KLF. He vanished again for another week or so and then I got a message that a lecture was scheduled for me at SIUT. I stopped thinking about KLF and what I would say in my session and began planning for the lecture. I had never spoken to a group of highly qualified doctors.

I came out of the session where Sehba Sarwar's session was held and moved towards the meeting zone. People were spread out on chairs, on the lawn, tea cups in hand, laughing or seriously discussing something, the sunshine was mellow, the air smelt of the sea that formed a deep blue green backdrop. I saw Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali sitting with a bunch of young men and women and two small children. I was moving up to them when suddenly there was a sudden sound that can only be termed an eruption. It was like everyone gawking at the same time and then there was pin drop silence. I stopped in my tracks. This seemed too close to the burst of sobs and the sudden silence that had descended on Delhi after the death of Indira Gandhi was announced. But I can feel the absence of anger as I had experienced then and there is a distinct presence of something else, something like admiration. I see Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali hurriedly get up and salute a white-haired gentleman. He is not very tall, of medium built, with tufty white, curly hair that must have been a lot of trouble to his mother.

I don't know whether to barge in or hold myself in check, but reverence gets the better of me. Mir Mohammad Ali introduces me and I hear the familiar "Khush raho" in reply to my 'Adaab.' He then reaches out for Mir Mohammad Ali's extended hands. Lovingly Dr. Adeeb Rizvi strokes the hands "These are my hands, these are my fingers, palm and thumb." It is then that I learn that Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali, an active guerilla fighter in his youth with the Balochistan Liberation Forces had been in the process of making bombs when one of them exploded in his hands. News had reached Dr. Adeeb that the young revolutionary would surely die due to lack of medical aid. Armed with antibiotics and a surgical kit Dr. Adeeb had travelled deep inside Balochistan, in the last lap riding a camel because the camp where the comrades were hidden was inaccessible by road. He had conducted the surgery, prescribed the medicines, taken care of all the injured till they were out of danger. The one's he is holding are indeed his hands.

My respect for the man goes up; a doctor with a head, a heart, a soul, and all being charged by commitment; what else could the earth desire. He is nonchalant about his fame, moves around with ease, insists on buying one entire set of my books when I would have been more than happy to gift them to him. Jaffer bhai has a victorious smile and teases me about belonging to the same village as Doctor Adeeb Rizvi.

Every time I visit my village Kalanpur, I see Dr. Adeeb Rizvi's house. It stands bang opposite our ancestral house, across the huge pond that marks the centre of the village. I have heard stories about his turning

up unannounced to the village that he left when he was 17 years old. Then he would set up a table and like a miracle there would be a long queue of patients whom he would treat free of charge, jovially scolding them for wrong diet and filthy habits in our native dialect Purabia, an off shoot of Bhojpuri.

“Every time I go to my village it is for two days, but I end up spending ten.” He says as if following my train of thoughts. “It is the soil of one’s place of birth that lays claim on the heart and soul; it tugs my heart and I have to make extra effort to detach myself somehow and leave!” I know just what he must feel, the yearning of personal belonging and officially being an outsider. I long to ask if he is happy here; if he is considered a foreigner, a mohajir in this country, if his great service given in all humility to the land of his choice is actually an effort to strike roots in an alien land?

I dare not ask and she standing beside him nods approvingly. Dr. Adeeb is leaving but he promises to be here tomorrow for my session. I am overwhelmed. And then he offers to escort me round his hospital in Karachi and then invites me to Sukkur. This town is the place where Henu Kalani was born and hanged; he was the first martyr of All India Students Federation (AISF). I am still not very familiar with the geography of Sindh and look inquiring at Aslam who immediately offers to escort me to Sukkur on way back from Mohenjo Daro. And it is fixed for next Friday because that is when Dr. Adeeb Rizvi takes a shuttle train to reach Sukkur early in the morning, attends to the patients, spends time meeting doctors, shares advice on critical cases and takes the train back to Karachi on Saturday or Sunday to be able to attend work on Monday.

“Why does he take the train? Surely he has a car” I ask Jaffer bhai who smiles and mumbles a mysterious “you shall find out when you come to Sukkur.”

Comrade Mir Mohammad Ali has brought an Ajrak for me. I have fallen in love with Sindhi Ajrak. I have come to know of weavers and block printers making it in Rajasthan as well, but they are not a patch on the ones that come out of traditional Sindh. As he puts it round me I know it is an expensive one. At this rate I shall soon have Ajraks to last me a lifetime and enough leftover to be my shroud.

Tehmina Ahmed is again a distant relative. She is recording the festival and taking individual interviews with festival participants. After my interview we begin talking about the people I would be meeting in Karachi and I express the regret for not being able to meet Naushaba, Comrade Sibte Hasan’s daughter. Since my last meeting with her she has changed house a couple of times and was conspicuous by her absence during the Sajjad Zaheer Centenary programs. Tahmina immediately offers to connect me and next day Naushaba calls and turns up at the KLF.

Sometimes long-lost friends should remain just that: lost. I remember her as a chirpy, focused journalist, someone who talked sensibly about politics, literature and people. Now she is muddled about time and events, she is also very definite that she is right and adamant that one should accept her version as the correct one. She is confused about us sisters, insists on telling me what I have been doing all my life, resolute about making me accept that I am a scientist and giggles when I point out that I wouldn’t be here if I was not a writer. I don’t blame her, we are quite a handful. I am worried; she is lonely and not doing anything about it. She says she is not hungry but when coffee is brought for her she asks why it is not accompanied by something to eat; she quickly eats what is placed before her but repeats that she is

not hungry. She tells me that she shall not be able to come for my session at the KLF and immediately moves to the amount of money I make from writing and who paid for my travel; I am interested in getting Comrade Sibte Hasan's works translated to English and Ameena Sayeed has shown some interest. But I know it shall not happen; Naushaba is too hung up on the amount that would come her way as the sole heir to his works.

Loneliness is like the salt that stubbornly keeps crawling up the walls of Mohenjo Daro and has to be kept under control with clay glazing. But these must be applied oneself, work on oneself has to be as unceasing as the effort on others has to be sustained. Usually they go together. If one stops working on change for others one also disregards the need to pay attention to oneself; to make transformation of outside doable one must realize that change inside is a necessity. Perhaps the reason why Buddha accepted invitations to talk to kings and princes was because they held the key to change the life of so many that if they modified themselves, led a different life, they would begin to see what has been hidden from them because of their lifestyle.

Gautama walks away to become Buddha not because he wants answers to pain but because he wants to teach people to find questions to live. A vague memory of Zahida Hena informing me that Naushaba has become a very different person comes alive and I wish this meeting had never happened.

Friends for quite a while now I met Ruchira Gupta in the morning. I am glad she is there, it is necessary to have a sharing in important issues that involve the women. Ruchira is working with sex-workers, organizing them towards livelihood training, legal protection and safe housing. Trafficking was made into a penal offence through the criminal law amendment act due to the efforts of people like her. The panel also includes the ex-minister for Women Welfare of Pakistan and head of the Punjab Council for Women, a leading social activist of Pakistan.

The discussion is vibrant and informative; Ruchira is her usual self, full of dark humour, dropping words like 'rape' 'sex worker' 'adultery' and 'prostitute' as and when she feels necessary. I can see the audience and the panel both cringing at her lack of discretion. Laws, amendments and social responsibility in the two countries are being compared as they should be for neighbours to benefit from each other's experience; then Ruchira points out the necessity of making changes in the law to make social activism a reality and the responsibility of the governments to provide security to citizens of the state. The ex-minister on the panel immediately replies that all governments are failures and one should not expect them to do anything. It is the people who must look after themselves.

Even though I have no faith in any bourgeois government I am taken aback at this nonchalant way an ex-minister absolves the government of all responsibility. Or maybe that is why she is doing it, because while she was part of the regime she did not do enough and does not wish to do anything if she is ever at the helm again. We have democratically elected governments all over South Asia; but should things stop at that. The main work is still left undone—to make democratically elected governments work.

I say as much and there is a non-committal answer from the panel, only Ruchira gives me a thumb's up. We are two women lost in a crowd that has decided that because something is not in our face, it is not really happening. When I sit down angrily Aslam whispers in my ear "can't you see the difference in the

Indian and Pakistani social activists? Look at the way Pakistani ones are dolled up!” For the first time I notice Ruchira’s shabby shirt and faded jeans. The desire to hug her is overwhelming.

Out in the open we find Wahid Baloch waiting for me. His smile is so slow that it takes a while to register but his eyes have a questioning warmth, something that puts people at ease without words. One knows one can trust Wahid Baloch with anything. Just now I know that he must have brought something which I would really cherish all my life. I do not know what it is, but I am sure I would be unhappy if I did not get it. Not a man of many words one does not feel neglected or unwelcome in his presence. Maybe that is why people surround him, maybe that is why he is so welcome wherever he goes, maybe that is why he would be picked up by the ‘agencies’ six months after the KLF and taken to an unknown destination. And probably that is why the ‘agencies’ would keep denying that he is in their custody and the police would keep up a façade of looking for him even when the witnesses in the local bus from where he was picked up would give statements that his identification was properly checked before he was taken away, negating the police claim that it was a case for looting and robbery.

Six months after KLF, when I received this news, I had held the piece of paper to my heart. The piece of paper which had a copy of my father’s ghazal that he had written in Mach Jail, in Balochistan and given to one of the young comrades who came to meet him every time he was brought to Quetta Court, the poem that had been published in a magazine and Wahid Baloch had brought it for me. Abba probably did not think that it was an important piece of work and it is not included in his collection of poems ‘Pighla Neelam’; but for me it was a reaching out of a long dead father to a daughter who did not get to know him well. Now the daughter of the man who had been instrumental in this meeting, runs here and there looking for some clue of her vanished father. Hani is the name of Wahid Baloch’s daughter. I so much want to hold her to my heart, so much wish to wipe out the fears that must be welling in her heart and recite to her ‘lambi hai gham ki shaam magar shaam hi to hai!’

Three months later as mysteriously as he had vanished, he returned. I am nowhere near, but my being is full of joy, the only sorrow is that I cannot see the joy on the face of the daughter Hani. Almost a year later my daughter Pankhuri meets and holds Hani in her arms during the International Youth Festival, in Sochi, Russia. I see fascists winning all around me, I know caste, racism are back with a vengeance, feminism is about possessing the zero figure, war jingoism is leading to destruction of progressive, liberal countries like Iraq and Libya; long seems the night but life continues to give me hope when the next generation takes up the cause of humanity, when social justice and economic equality is discussed inside the realms of free markets and when Pankhuris and Hanis of the next generation continue to fight on the same side.

CHAPTER FOUR

The following day is the discussion on my translation of Ismat Chughtai’s autobiography KAGHAZI HAI PAIRAN. I am pleased that Arfa Apa is conducting the panel which also includes Khawar Mumtaz and Saif Mahmood. Khawar Mumtaz is Ismat Chughtai’s niece, but more than that she is a women’s rights activist and has been Chairperson of the National Commission for the Status of Women, Pakistan. I

marvel at the huge leap Muslim women have taken in one generation and at the way regressive forces have come together to take back all that has been achieved; Saif Mahmood is a lawyer from India, well read in Urdu literature and a leftist. It cannot get any better than this for me, and the discussion progresses extremely well with Saif reading out portions from the book and Arfa Apa setting the pace with her comment “we are called leftists because we are people with a heart and left is where the heart is!” The following question and answer portion also moves at a fast pace with Arfa Apa passing over inane questions with finesse. Then a young girl stands up and wants to know, “Does a communist necessarily have to be an atheist?” No one on the panel seems to wish to go into this and everyone is looking at me. I explain that it is not a prerequisite but reading Marx and Lenin and slowly developing a Marxist approach to problems and issues makes one understand that problems around us have been created by humans and so can also be resolved by humans. Slowly the dependence on a super power decreases and one learns to take charge of life and try and make the changes that normally people would leave to fate, destiny or prayer. I also clarify that yes, I am a communist and an atheist. Why does the hall erupt with claps? It is what I am and have never hidden it!

I know it is blasphemy to say one is an atheist in Pakistan. It can lead to public ostracization, stoning, divorce and lynching. But nowhere have I seen people express their inner urge to do away with religion and belief as they do in Pakistan. Yes, they do it only in secure, trusted company, but one can feel the pent-up fury at the overtaking of secular spaces by religion. The wish that the liberal, progressive forces must reorganize themselves is getting stronger; at the very least we should get down to the questioning. But before I can dwell on it a gentleman gets up to ask a question and I turn my attention on him.

“I saw Sajjad Zaheer when I was a young man, he was barefoot, bare-head, walking with the Tazia procession lost in thought-----.” He has not completed when the hall erupts again, this time with laughter. I want to embrace each one of them for having so much confidence in my father. I don’t really have to answer this man who also claims to be a distant relative and says he is seventy five! Abba has written in one of his articles on religious belief that he decided not to participate in any form of religious display on his 28th birthday. We celebrated his centenary in 2005/6. How could a man who is seventy five in 2016 have seen him before he was 28? Could Abba have been lying in this article? I glance at him after this quick calculation and see the expression that I have come to recognize so well “I am lying but I am doing so in god’s name, so it is fine.” The self-righteousness that has created the massive network of lies called religion. I long to say to him “Why don’t you create your own icons? Why are you so anxious to take away what is ours? Why so keen to prove that our icons were believers, or worshippers or religious? Why is their popularity such a threat to you and your gods?” I wish to shout out “Cowards! Cringing, groveling, crawling because of your own fears, you hate anyone who lays claim to a spine; and in your hatred, you invent lies to prove that everyone is as spineless as you.” Cowardice is contagious, and decorum helps to keep it hidden. I swallow my anger.

It is over, the KLF. But for once I am not unhappy or feeling the vacuum. There is lots more coming up in the next few days. I pack fast and am done sooner than my ‘Three Musketeers’ had expected me to be. Aslam, Gullu and Hasan quickly throw away their cigarettes and are ready in attendance. Let no one ever say that we communists do not know how to make people feel like royalty. Dr. Tipu Sultan, Dr. Sher Shah’s brother has offered to drive me to Aisha and Haris Gazdar’s house. It dawns that their parents

have named their two sons after progressive, liberal kings and wonder if I should ask him the names of his other brothers and what about the sisters? As we wait for him to bring his car a distinguished looking man with silver streaked hair and broad frame walks up with a pretty lady. Aslam greets them and introduces me. He is Taj Haider a senator of the PPP. He was a leftist in his youth but then switched to the People's Party of Pakistan. I am saddened by the loss of capable minds to the bourgeois parties, but I suppose it cannot be helped unless a new, dynamic leadership emerges from the Left and charts a plan of action that attracts back all the people who have walked away.

It turns out that this gentleman still holds a warmth for the Left and he enquires about my plans, is told about the forthcoming visit to Mohenjo Daro, offers help and instructs Aslam to get in touch with him in case anything is required. For the nth time I question myself how am I ever going to pay back all these people who offer to help without my asking? He quickly also recounts the care that is being taken of other ancient sites in Sindh; my heart warms to anyone who lays claim to all there is to civilization. It is difficult to understand why the world seems to be going backwards with so many good people around. Maybe there is something in the Kalchakra of the Mahayana Buddhism; what 'is' has to become the 'been.' I only wish the 'been' had not started in my time.

Aisha's welcome is so warm that one cannot feel an outsider. There is also a festive air in the house because Haris is to be married soon. I shall be meeting Noorulain, the bride during my stay. And then this is the house of Saeeda Gazdar, comrade, senior writer and activist. Suitcase and bags put away in my room, I wash my hands carefully. This is a caution one must take before visiting Comrade Saeeda and I long to sit with her, to talk to her, ask her questions I know she will not answer, tell her things that she might not register; so much has happened in her lifetime, so much seemed a possibility, was close, within reach and then has been lost. I informed some people that I would be moving to Saeeda Gazdar's house and they looked surprised. In a patriarchal set up the house belongs to the man; now that Mushtaq Gazdar is not alive the house belongs to Haris, the son. A couple of them also hinted that it is time Haris decided to let his mother go since she would never recover. I am personally grateful that Haris and Aisha both have never taken this decision. The two nurses for day and night care are integrated into the house and conduct themselves as part of the family. One of them is there right now and greets me like a friend. I see a glitter of familiarity in Comrade Saeeda's eyes as I wish her 'Lal Salaam'. Maybe I have imagined it. I talk for a long time to her; how easy it is to talk to someone you know is listening and understanding and not interrupting with irrelevant questions. Her hand is soft and peculiarly warm. I kiss it. I know I shouldn't, there is the danger of infection, but I am unable to check myself. She smiles with a frown; liking the gesture but not recognizing me.

Jamuna comes in and brings me a chair to sit. She is the cook the Gazdar's have had for the last twenty years. She wears a loose long skirt like a lehnga with a kurti and a chunni worn in the style of rural Gujarat. Jamuna is also completely integrated into the house. This was something that Saeeda and Mushtaq Gazdar had decided; whatever their resources, they would employ as many Hindus as they could. Aisha and Haris have maintained this and Jamuna moves around the house like a family elder, ordering everyone to dinner and deciding the change in the menu according to availability of ingredients in the market. She tells me her daughter has been married in India; it has been several years since she

has visited. Jamuna cannot visit her because she shall then not be allowed to return home. How does one define 'home'? The daughter is well and safe and that is what is important.

I suppose there shall always be the majoritarianism based on religion, language, caste and so many other things that are tools for creating divisions, isolating the minorities and making them vulnerable just as there would always be people like the Gazdars who continue to make precincts of humanity. I suddenly understand why Saeeda Gazdar has not said good bye to this world yet; she continues to live because she does not wish to be alone.

We sit down to dinner and Aisha uses the delightful word 'Androon' for traveling to the interior region. Why do we in India not use such words that are understood and mean the same in both Urdu and Hindi and carry so many layers of meaning?

At the KLF I had met Naila Mahmood or Lali as she prefers to be called by friends. She had also contributed to 'Borderlines' the volume of essays edited by Sehba Sarwar. I had met her last when she and her husband had accompanied Comrade Sibte Hasan to India in 1986. Thirty years! They were then a bubbly, laughing pair of young lovebirds, so happy to be travelling, cherishing every minute they had outside Zia-ul-Haq's repressive regime, astonished at the number of dance, theatre, music events happening in Delhi, hoping to be back in a couple of years and then vanishing into the blue called the United States of America! Tomorrow I shall have dinner at her place. Haris tells me that her husband is the biggest pharmaceutical drug supplier in Pakistan. I remembered him an architect but am pleased because this means that comrades like Lateef Mughal shall now have access to these 'hard to get' expensive drugs. So, what if he is now a business tycoon? He was a comrade in his youth and can be reminded of his earlier inclinations and asked to help. I shall personally do this; surely, he would not be able to refuse me!

How presumptuous we are! How very sure of our power! Khalid Mahmood is not attending the party at his own house. We, the guests are writers, and not important enough. There are six women and Haris who takes charge of drinks. Friends say I am too frank for comfort; this turns to being blunt after three pegs, so I prolong the second and Haris smiles. Maybe he understands that I do not want to talk too much. Then poetry comes to my rescue. Lali has a recording of songs sung by the migrant Bangladeshi labourers. She works with them and is also addressing their culture. As the songs unfold I realize that some of them are Lalon Geeti. Nobody knows Lalon Fakir, no one has heard of the Baul minstrels, few delve into the layers of alienation that led to separation, fewer still understand the pain of the separated. How do these Bangladeshi migrants feel about Pakistan? They cross through India, mostly walk across the country to cross into Pakistan from the Rajasthan border, comparatively porous than the Punjab one; many die in the crossing, many decide to stay in India and all continue to yearn for the 'amaar sonar Bangla' as the dry desert sun beats down relentlessly on them, as they struggle to understand instructions in a language they shall never learn, scrub dishes that held the food they shall never eat and all the time the longing of the 'magur' and 'puti maachh', fish of the village pond lingering on the dead taste-buds.

“Lalon bole Lalon ki jaat, ye sansaare.” Lalon stays with them to lend solace, to make sleep a possibility and acceptance a way of life. The song is slow but rhythmic, giving listeners a time to let the melody flow and absorb the meaning of the poetry. I explain the meaning of Lalon claiming to have no religion or caste in this world; the influence this illiterate poet had on Rabindranath Tagore and how important it is to explore Baul, Sufi and Bhakti songs to understand the essence of the land mass that is South Asia.

I am growing old; of late mysticism attracts me and I can talk about it for hours. But obviously this is not the place or the time to indulge in it. “Oh! This is exactly how Baba Farid also puts it; I don’t remember the exact words, but this is what it is.” This is Maniza Naqvi of the high pitched, know all women category. The spell is broken for me and for Lali. Her smile holds a promise; that she would look up the translation of Lalon Fakir or maybe she would talk about his poetry to these women who have been singing Lalon to survive. Maniza is pleased that she has been able to successfully divert everyone from something unimportant and happily begins to talk of the new chain of eco-friendly textile stores in Sweden.

“Are you a fulltime writer?” I ask her as we eat.

“No, but I am afraid to tell you what I do for a living. You will be angry”

“So, tell me why you sell arms!”

“But I don’t sell arms!” she looks shocked.

“Well that is the only thing that would make me angry.”

Aisha giggles and the Naqvi woman says nervously “I work for the World Bank”

“Which is a delightful camouflage for selling weapons.”

“See, I knew you would be angry.”

I sigh and turn away. I am tired of stereotypes, I am fed up of people holding out readymade moulds, not willing to discuss or debate on the pretext of knowing everything; I have no more energy left to try and convince those around me to deal individually with people, because that is what they are—entities and not bulk productions. For Pete’s Sake why would I be angry with someone for working in the world bank just because the once upon a time USSR was opposed to it and I am a communist. Give me credit for possessing a head; but then isn’t this one of the problems of capitalism; it mass manufactures ‘know alls!’.

Khalid Mahmood and Nadeem Khalid fondly called Noni come around half past ten when dinner is almost over, and we have reached dessert which is a delicately flavoured ‘gaajar ka halva’. Lali has been unwell in the last few years and though not thin she has a waif like appearance. I eat a spoon of the halwa, close my eyes in delight and whisper “Lali you made this?” “How do you know?” She smiles and questions.

“Because it has the flavor of time lovingly invested” Her hug is warm.

The men had been away to the elections of the body of an elite club. They eat hurriedly, drink even faster and are back to discussing business. Khalid Mahmood of course was never a comrade but Noni is the son of a comrade, had his education in USSR and married Hoorie, a comrade's daughter. From a distant past resonates 'every USSR returned is a degenerate.' Some friends in Pakistan had told me that all the senior comrades of Pakistan had sent their children to USSR for education and all of them had become big businessmen, fleecing the masses, buying government officials and corrupting the society. I had then scolded them and asked them to maintain bonds with these businessmen and try and get as much help as possible for the Left movement. Now I know it shall be a waste of time.

CHAPTER FIVE

My small bag is packed and very early in the morning I am ready for 'androon.' Aslam comes with the cab I have hired; a quick breakfast and we are away. The plan is to reach Sehwan by afternoon and visit the Dargah of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. My earlier visit to Shahbaaz Qalandar had been crowded and hurried. I now wish to be there for a while, and if possible visit the Gurudwara nearby. Then proceed to reach Mohenjo Daro by night, spend a leisurely day roaming the site, see it scorched by sun, soothed by the evening breeze and bathed in moonlight. Next day wake up before dawn and see it greeting the morning sun. I smile at the sheer pleasure of the anticipation.

We stop for tea and drive on to stop for lunch in a small village. There are the traditional charpoys spread out and the fragrant smell of hot tandoori roti wafts down. I am suddenly very hungry. The owner realizes I am an outsider, is informed that I am from India and three delectably cooked dishes, one each of fish, chicken and beef are brought with soft rotis. I am wolfing down the second roti when Aslam says, "We have the whole of Wednesday and Thursday at our disposal." He had said it once when he insisted on having breakfast at Aisha's house when I would rather have had it on the road, "what is the hurry we have two full days at our disposal, Wednesday and Thursday?" and then again when quite unnecessarily we stopped for mid-morning tea. I had put it to his love for tea or just wanting to stretch his legs. Third time round I ask him squarely "Are you doing this on purpose? How do we have Wednesday and Thursday when today is Wednesday and more than half of it is done?"

He fumbles and checks and then fumbles some more and then casually admits that he has miscalculated and one day has been missed in his plan. I do a quick calculation and realize that I shall have to give up something; a few moments of deliberation and history wins. If I must see Mohenjo Daro by evening and at dawn then I must skip Sehwan, the Dargah and the Gurdwara. Tough decision, but it must be taken. As we get up from the meal I inform Aslam. He agrees immediately and seems a bit relieved; of what? Did he expect me to throw a tantrum in the middle of the desert? From the highway I see a road leading to the Dargah. Aslam points out the flame visible from this distance that is always burning and the large dome. I nod and look away.

Exactly a year from that day Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is a target for terror attack; a suicide bomber killed 85 people 20 of them children just as they were preparing for Dhamaal, the ritual dance of worship and abandon. I wish I had been able to visit it then in its pristine avatar; now whenever I visit the shrine the horror of the brutal attack shall accompany me.

It is evening as we reach Mohanjo Daro. This is how the earlier texts written on the first excavations spells it. City of Mohan. Who was this Mohan? The last to leave this settlement? The first to arrive at the excavations? Then there is the Sindhi version, 'Mohen Jo daro', meaning the mound ahead or in front as the mound faces a few villages and has its back to the River Indus. Of late the name has been changed to Moenjo Daro- City of the Dead! What a lot of name changing takes place on both sides of the border. Identity Crisis the historians say; stupid politics say writers like me. Whatever it is we South Asians indulge in it with vengeance. For me this is the place where I began my journey.

It takes a few minutes to get permission to enter the gates. The guest house is very close to the site and I stand tapping my feet in impatience as the register is filled, rooms allotted and futile questions about tea and dinner answered. Who wants to eat when one can live? The sun is about to set, and I want to be at the site. I dump my bag in my room, splash cold water on my face and run down the steps. A short gravel path leads up to the site which begins with large replicas of the priest bust, a boat with hand oars and two huge boards, one of the map and another that gives the details of the discovery and excavations. I do not stop. Haven't I yearned to be here ever since I was sixteen; when Abba had read out to me some works of R.D.Bannerji, the first archeologist to discover and work on the Indus Valley Civilization. We had discussed his own stay in Sindh and his regret at not being able to visit the excavations of the Indus Valley Civilization. He had also revealed that he thought History and Mathematics were the two disciplines from which arose all the rest. Today I agree and do not agree with him. But I quell the discussion raging within me. I must be internally calm and open to let what is before me seep within and internalize itself. The dark might be an obstruction, so I must reach the site as soon as I can.

The sun is already touching the expanse of the horizon. It would soon be dark. My short, almost jogging steps match Aslam's casual strides as we turn towards the first excavation- the one that had given away the hidden, the Stupa believed to have been built almost two thousand years after the settlement had been abandoned.

I need not have worried. The sun takes a breather, resting its tired back at the rim of the earth. It lingers, looking at the city it had seen bustling with activity, watching over the farmers drying the corn for storage in the great granary, the artisans stamping their wares with the unicorn and oxen seals, the dancing, merrymaking women. It seems a bit sad at the era abandoned, at movement in a different direction of life and humanity. It is past its time to set but the sun is loath to leave the most developed civilization of its time. Reluctantly it sighs and give in to the tug of time allowing itself to be scraped a wedge, and then a bit more till it is gone beyond the horizon. The world around me shimmers for a few minutes and then reluctantly begins to crawl towards the dark.

I am here. I'll reach out to touch the time gone by, the development achieved, I'll savor the pain of being, argue with myself. I remember Chandrashekharan, the Kannada comrade of Hassan who had joked about his belief of being able to decipher the script found on the tablets of this ancient ruin and the manner his daughter had put him in place saying 'Appa I know you shall not succeed but I admire you for your enthusiasm and confidence;' I'll taste the salt that keeps climbing up the structures in the hope of nibbling it away, the reason that supposedly led to its desertion when wells turned saline and

Indus moved away. Water seems to be the crisis point in Sindh. At present it is a fight against Kala Bagh Dam, a dam that would deny water to the entire Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region and benefit only Punjab. I identify with the Sindhi concern. Haven't we fought and lost in the case of Sardar Sarovar which has benefitted Gujarat but deprived the tribes of their land and turned them into rikshaw pullers and menial laborers. More than the land it is the loss of culture and connectivity; can a people exist without both? Sindhis who are sandwiched between the migrants from India and the Punjabi dominance. The migrants have tried their level best to maintain their identity and not assimilate or own anything Sindhi. The post partition refugees, *mohajirs* as they are called have tried to maintain their identity, culture and language. Not one migrant I have met till now speaks Sindhi. Why I wonder? The Punjabis treat the Sindhis as being culturally inferior, fond of sleeping, lazy good for nothings indulging in Sufism because of its bohemianism, leaving one to exist as individuals. Sindhis do not seem to care much for the opinion of the Punjabis. They have befriended the Baloch who have been living in the neighboring region for centuries; Sindhis have developed a tolerance for the Pathans who come to Karachi and Hyderabad for work. Baloch and Sindhis can be found making snide comments at Punjabis much like the Bengalis and Lucknowites would in India.

I have heard many interesting things happening in Sindh. Work brings immigrants from KPK to the biggest city in Pakistan. There is so much happening in Sindh on a daily basis that migrants are hardly ever questioned about their background. Tall, strong good looking Pathans soon became the 'gorkhas' of the Sindhi rich. Honest and hard-working they soon became trusted additions to the functioning of the households. Till they began objecting to the way daughters of the house dressed, the women laughing with strangers and the absence of religion and its strict rulings. The Sindhi is basically liberal. Most Sindhi women do not wear the hijab; many are even careless about covering their head, music is an important part of Sindhi life and Sufism with its secularism is the way of existence here. Threatened by this interference in personal space the Sindhi householder quickly opted to replace the Pathans. 'That is why we hope that the upper class shall support our struggle for secularism and for social justice. Religious fanaticism shall also attack their way of life.' A young Baloch says enthusiastically. I smile at his enthusiasm and do not counter it. The neo-rich of anywhere; who lived out of Pakistan for a few years, came back, invested well and now live in their little cocoons with well-guarded gates, razor barbed wires, wear the clothes they wish to because they are never out on the roads, never wait for a bus, never travel in trains. Life is lived in protected bubbles. The rich shall simply shut their doors and continue to party. They shall keep both the struggle against fundamentalism and its objections outside their closed door. It is the one who does not possess a house with high walls, whose life is divided equally between the road and the hovel, one who struggles to make ends meet and hopes that their children shall gain education and improve their lot; one who has nothing to lose in the struggle and everything to gain if it succeeds who shall challenge fundamentalism because it negates change and propagates a status quo.

Sometimes it is shocking the simplistic analysis of the Left. The rich know the real danger comes from the communists because they would change the economic system. Or is this young communist's 'us' different from mine. Is he only looking for a more democratic space and not aiming for effort that would lead to or prepare the ground for a total upheaval.

Or am I different and stationary; not changing one bit since the 80's so that I am a misfit with those I met then and am meeting again in another garb. How can I expect them to have remained stationary?

I'll live the night at Mohenjo Daro as I had promised myself ten years back. The site is not visible from the guest house but it is with warm anticipation that I pull back the cover of the bed and lie down to rest. Sleep I shall not, rest I must.

CHAPTER SIX

The sky is still dark as I get up and tentatively knock on Aslam's door. The driver of our cab is also in the same room and I do not want him to wake up and accompany us. Aslam opens the door immediately. I wonder if Aslam had been awake through the night in anticipation of the morning. This is not his first visit to Mohenjo Daro. Does he identify with it the same way as I do? Does he believe that he is what he is because of Mohenjo Daro? Or does he believe this to be Moenjo Daro, the city of the dead, as the Maulvis talk about it that even so developed a civilization can be ruined because it did not believe in 'Allah.' He had been very enthusiastic about a woman dancing at the Bhit Shah last time, even going up to the extent of saying that this is one shrine where inhibitions can be completely abandoned. Maybe he is just rewriting history to suit himself. Aren't we all? Camouflaging the embarrassing portions, hiding the skeletons, changing the past to make the present comfortable.

We have reached the first site that we had seen yesterday and move down the path towards the east. This suits me because I wish to see the sun rising; I want to see its face as it discovers the lived again. The granary, the huge bath tank, the stupa above them, the centuries visible in the layers of dust.

The sun has not risen yet, but the horizon has turned a pinkish grey. She is not with me, but I know she is not far away; I shall meet her sooner than later. The assurance comes with a touch of pride. She needs to talk to someone just as I do. It is sisterhood.

The next settlement is the quarters of the rich; spacious rooms, large courtyards. I stand on a mound and make a visual survey. The covered drains run around the complex and there are larger ones dug up recently to check the flow of rain water from entering the construction. A basic preservation technique of painting the bricks with a solution of clay to stop the spread of salt has been done. I must turn towards north and climb down a staircase to reach the complex for a closer examination. I look to the east to check on the sun and almost trip on the steps. How? When did it rise? It had just begun to emerge when I had begun visually taking stock of what lay before me. Now it was almost at 20 degrees above the horizon, no longer red or yellow, it was fiery white with the space around it shimmering with its heat. Had it missed this place while it had to be away and had leapt up from the confines of the horizon to freedom, to examine and reassure itself that all was as it should be with this settlement it knew so well? It was as it had left it yesterday, that no outsider touched it, abused it or misjudged it; that it remained as mysterious as it was till yesterday so that the sun could laugh at the foolishness of humanity that wished to classify, codify and categorize something as obscure, as ever-changing as civilization?

I know I am being silly. The sun cannot know it so well. It is too far away. I had probably stopped for a while on the steps thinking, giving the sun time to climb so high. I descend slowly.

The broad, flat road is crowded with people carrying large pottery plates full of flowers that they are scattering as they dance and sing. Women are decorated with jewelry of large beads, men dressed in fine colourful muslin; all are laughing and celebrating. No one is rich, none a beggar, everyone is satisfied. After the festivity is over people shall pick up their spades, axes, chisels and hammers; a new canal has been dug from the river Indus that shall spread greenery to far, far off land. Today water shall be let into the dry canal hence the celebration of man's success over turning far-flung barren land into green fields, celebration for man's capacity to overturn his destiny and rewrite his fate; celebration of the real Brahma: the human!

No, I do not wish to reduce the greatness of Mohenjo Daro by kneeling and touching my head to the ground; I cannot reduce its greatness by turning this visit into worship, but I do so wish to roll in its dust as one who has found a mother's lap after long and wishes to rest and to throw a tantrum. This road is called the King's way but there was no king or ruler; this must have been the People's Road. How can any Royal road have survived this long? I had been a bit surprised at the absence of tourists. I had imagined it as ruins but surrounded by green, sprinkled with visitors and picnickers. The guide Irshad Ali had awkwardly mumbled "it is a bit out of the way.'

Right at the beginning of the excavations a Stupa had been found and this site had been proclaimed an ancient Buddhist city. Even today some Buddhist scholars believe that this is proof of Buddha having been on this earth before the Gautama, proving the existence of Tathagatha-the one who has come and gone! And his believers had lived here. Later the stupa was dated as being two thousand years later than the remnants of the Indus Valley civilization. The Buddhists had simply picked up the bricks lying around and created their stupa. I feel a bit let down. How could those believing in Buddha have been so heartless as to create their worship place from the pieces of an abandoned civilization?

"Why? What is so surprising? You are familiar with so many of such examples."

"You have come. I have been waiting for you!"

"No, you have been waiting for information"

"Accepted" I concede. "Now do come down. What are you doing so high up?"

"This is the rim of a well"

"Well!" My heart jumps to my mouth as stories of drownings in the village well surface from my childhood and chase each other in my brain. "Come down at once!"

"This is a double storey well. I wanted to tell you about it. See how interesting it is. Capillary system is used here to carry water up to the top floor of the house so that those living on the first floor do not have to climb down for water. People here were obsessed with digging wells. Every house has one, then there are several community wells and they have different faces too."

“How can wells have different faces? How can one be different from the other?”

She waives her hands carelessly “some round, others oval, square, egg shaped; one is even shaped like a star!”

“Tell me when these wells were discovered did any have water in them?” Did some corner of my heart yearn to taste this water once; carrying the flavor of human courage and strength, more pure and precious than the water of Ganga and Zam Zam.”

“Yes one did and it was sweet water, but-----.”

“But what?”

“Buried for thousands of years it maintained its sweetness but once it was opened its water turned saline in a short time.”

“Can I---?”

“No, you cannot touch the water. There is a cover over it. Look!” I stand over the grave of a well that had survived under tons of earth but the moment it was unearthed it was killed by the present civilization. Aren’t we doing the same with so many tribes? In the name of development, to bring them to the mainstream we are destroying their very identity. Understanding my melancholy, she pulled me to one side “Let the well be. Come with me to see the most renowned structure of this place- the great bath.”

Huge, deep and organized- a passage for fresh water, separate outlet for the used; clean, smooth tiles that perhaps served for oil, sandalwood paste and turmeric massages, equal sized steps, covered drains so that the filthy water would not pollute the air of the city.

“That era practiced equality amongst men and women. Maybe women also came here to bathe. Maybe their timings were different like in the village ghats of India.” “Maybe” she agreed and then looked at me mischievously and added “or maybe there were not so many taboos attached to the male and female body and both could bathe together.”

I must have blushed because Aslam walking by my side asked, “Is it too hot for you. Shall we turn back?”

“No, no! This is a lifelong wish fulfilled and you have already taken away one full day from it. I do not wish to lose a single moment.”

I think this miscalculation is very deliberate. He is bored like most men are in the company of a woman who is not always flattering them. Men like to be friends with independent women but then want the women to listen just to them, agree with everything they say and stop having an opinion of their own. I do not blame him; he has been born and brought up this way; and he lives here and can visit Mohenjo Daro as many times as he likes, probably has; perhaps he also believes that I waste too much time thinking. Why should I expect him to understand that ancient sites take time to open-up? And with me they are especially secretive making me wait for hours sometimes days to reconcile to the fact that I am

not going to give up on them. Some remain silent despite of all my effort, perhaps because they decide that they do not like me. I leave but do not forget them. Others when they open-up speak in riddles because every ancient site contains an invisible sphinx. I rather like that, the riddles. Perhaps Aslam is a 'peoples' person and doesn't think of ancient sites as beings. Why should I expect every friend to like what I do, love what I love?

I am angry at myself for not being able to take charge of my life. Why can I roam around freely in United Kingdom, Europe and in Indonesia and Egypt? Why do I need a male escort in Pakistan where I speak the language, wear the same kind of clothes, have the same physical appearance?

I am proved right. I take a quick round of the initial site and then familiar with the geography now embark on a slow second round that would focus on regions where I should spend more time. Aslam begins to lag, pretends that he has got a phone call and leaves me to manage with the guide. I am happy with the arrangement until I realize that the driver has joined us. He had been invisible since morning but now has suddenly decided that he wishes to accompany this crazy woman from India who finds these dusty ruins so interesting. He is also full of questions but not really interested in the answers. I tolerate his inane comments for about five minutes and then ask him to shut up or go back to the guest house. He turns glum, tries to follow my eyes and focus on what I am seeing, then smirks, hums a silly tune but does not go away. I know my leftist friends would be angry with me for not helping a worker, the ultimate owner of this earth, understand a bit of his history. But I oscillate between several roles and now the historian in me is asserting itself; or is it the woman that is getting just a bit tired of men. I also become aware that she has not been near since this fellow has joined me; I try to walk faster and come to sudden stops in an effort to shake him off.

Then I almost jump out of my skin; it is my phone ringing. I had forgotten it existed in my pocket. It is a call from Dr. Adeeb's assistant, informing me that Dr. Adeeb is expecting me in the afternoon. My position takes a leap and the driver now insists that I must leave at once and not make the great man wait. He does not wait for my reply or explanation and rushes off mumbling that he would wipe the car and have it ready. It is a victory of sorts and I thank the comrade doctor for helping me out albeit unknowingly. Irshad Ali smiles as I turn away from the road that leads towards the guest house and re-enter the site from another side. Some Pakistani friends insist that the vastness of this settlement of the civilization can be best understood with an aerial view, from a helicopter. Really! Without touching the soil? How is one to know something that had sprung from the soil, lay buried under it for millennia and had now reasserted itself to teach us a few lessons in humanity.

Early in the morning I had called Pankhuri, my eldest daughter. Deeply interested in history, Pankhuri has from the age of five walked through the galleries of the National Museum where replicas of the relics found in Mohenjo Daro are displayed. Both of us have often stared with admiration and respect at our past, have exclaimed in anger at our precious heritage now a part of the British museum and then consoled one another that they are being better protected there than here. We have promised each other to come to Mohenjo Daro together. I had no idea that my wish would be fulfilled, and so soon. She receives the phone and I like a criminal admit to being here alone. There is silence and then she says

very calmly “Without me! Mohenjo Daro! Ma how could you?” The line is disconnected. I wish she had shouted and ranted. She really is angry, and I miss her.

Someone sits nearby and places an arm round me “She shall also come. You may or may not be with her; see all that you can. Come I’ll show you the granary.”

I follow her to the huge, round space. I am about to step on it when she checks me “What do you think you are doing. It might break.” I look down and find the floor made up of thick, strong terracotta, so strong that even after centuries of being buried under the earth, exposed to wind and rain and dust it did not crumble and get absorbed in dust. It was not completely flat, the centre curved in a bit like a cooking pan. Entire excavation had yielded only one granary proving that it was the age of community farming, harvesting and storage.

“But how do we know that this is a granary. It just might be the floor of a palace?”

“Some grains of wheat were found here. You can see them in the museum.”

“How did they construct this floor of the granary? How did they bake it after drying? It must have been heated from above since it has no joints; but then what about the lower side? Why did it not crumble and vanish?”

“Bitumen!” she answered reading my thoughts

“You mean they knew how to make tar.” She waited for me to collect all this information standing all the while in the pose so familiar. But where? Where had I seen her standing like this before?”

“Come on. There is loads of time for you to think. I have to show you some more and we are running short of time.” She walked ahead, and the maze of the city had begun. I hurried after her afraid of losing her. Crossing several alleys and courtyards she entered a big house with a broad courtyard and two wells. “This is believed to be the house of the high priest or maybe that of the city’s governor.”

“But no other proof has been found here of worship and prayers. How can this be the house of a priest? Who was the king or governor of this place and how was he selected? Was there an election? Or was the bravest man made the chief? How was bravery measured? After all there were no wars then, so attacking someone and occupying their land could not have been considered bravery; reaching out to other lands was for trade not for grabbing and appropriating. That is why one does not find the horse in all the artefacts and seals recovered. Attacking with speed, killing the innocent, the unaware and running away after looting was not a part of life here. So then were the brave those who tackled the unknown, the fearsome? Those who tried to understand and simplify it and bring it into the periphery of everyone? Would the discoverer of fire, the creator of the wheel, the builder of dams be considered the brave? Those who are not frightened by nature and do not find refuge in meaningless myths but explore and discover to give life to reality. Maybe the chief priest of this place would not be one who creates a god but one who deconstructs its being and shows the straight, true road? Why is there a unilateral definition of bravery? Had people like Galileo, John Grey and Copernicus been born here, would they

have been respected as chief priests, given this big house and not been killed? Would they have been the 'real brave hearts?'

I am outside a big courtyard and there are huge, tub like vats made of brick and lined with bitumen set against the wall. There are several of them, some huge to fit in several people and some smaller ones, just big enough to allow two hands, more like kitchen sinks. I stop confused and she stands smiling, swinging away from the knee in rhythm with the call of the unseen kite that echoes between the sky and the earth. "What are these? We have seen the Great Bath, so what could these be? Personal bath tubs? But why out on the road? And why so many and of so many sizes?"

Perhaps I voice my questions aloud and Irshad Ali answers "These are not bathtubs; they are dyeing vats, used for mixing colours."

"I know the pottery excavated here has designs in several colours but would they need such big vats for colour? How much pottery were they producing?" I am confused and peer deep into the tubs that still have the telltale signs of colour in the recesses.

"Much of our confusion is because we refuse to see things that stare us in the face" She sounds exasperated and I do not blame her. I am not the brightest of pupils. She pats my back to console me and says "The three big ones are for the primary colours, the medium size for secondary ones and then there are the smaller ones for the shades mixed to appeal to the eye of the artiste. This is where the 'Ajrak' you love so much has its root."

Suddenly every bit of Ajrak that I have possessed becomes so dear to me, from the first one gifted by Comrade Mir Mohammad Talpur to the ones I shall receive from Sindhi comrades in the future. Why didn't I ever think this? Why did I throw away the ones that became old or faded?

"But your heart knew and that is why you loved the Ajrak from the moment you set eyes on it" I know she is trying to console me and revive my confidence.

"I wish my heart would be a bit more communicative and open itself to my brain once in a way." I mumble peevishly. She laughs, walks on then turns and looks at me. Her gaze travels to my frown and she raises her eyebrows in a silent inquiry. "Just thinking that Aslam should have seen this. He also loves the Ajrak and it is his heritage more than mine." She looks at me long and silent. Then as if suddenly deciding to speak her mind says "Stop it! Stop having very high expectations and feeling let down if friends do not live up to them; stop trying to change people. I don't usually advice people but you are----

"-----irritating me!" I complete it for her. She does not contradict me, and I walk away knowing that she is right. Irshad Ali is standing by a pile of broken earthenware. He picks up some pieces and hands them to me. They are thick and hard; baked over slow heat that was steadily increased to give them the toughness, much like the selective slow cooling of the earth that resulted in huge crystal rocks in some places. The reason why the bricks of this place have not crumbled and turned to dust. How close were my ancestors to Mother Nature? How distant I am from them! One by one I let go the bits of pottery.

When I am at the last one Irshad Ali holds my hand and says, "You can keep it." I look at him in surprise. "These are the rejects" he adds lamely. To me he seems richer and more generous than any emperor who walked this earth. I hold the piece to my heart.

"Stop! Thief!" I know she is laughing at me.

"Onex ashtrays, marble buddhas, sandstone tables, soap stone Sarasvati, ceramic darvesh, tomb tiles, rock Inuksuk and now this. Of late men have taken to presenting me stones." I recall the many gifts I have received from men recently.

"Maybe they are apologizing for having hurled stones at us for so many epochs." I feel a new comradeship born between us and we laugh as only women can at the unnecessary pain inflicted on us through the ages. How would women have survived if we had not learnt to laugh at ourselves?

Lost in so many questions that were bombarding my thoughts I am walking on when someone pulls my 'pallu.' I have long passed the age when someone would pull my pallu to tease me. I look back; she is holding my Pallu and pointing to a deep square pit.

"This is one of mysteries of this place. Though not deep, it has been dug in such a way that at no time of the day can sunrays enter it. There is no way out and in all possibility people were thrown here and left to die."

"You mean this was a death chamber? How can you say that?"

"Because during excavations several skeletons were discovered here."

"People here did not cremate; maybe this was a community burial site."

"The position in which the skeletons were found, some face down, some crouching in a corner and others spread out like starfish! Either they were pushed here, or they were killed and thrown in this room."

She follows me as I walk away. "Why are you so unhappy on seeing the mass grave?" She asks hesitantly.

"I had never imagined that something as violent as death sentence would be happening here. I believed that people here would be above jealousy, anger, revenge and enmity. Why should there be violence in a civilization that existed without religions?"

"The times you live in, your longing for such a society is understandable. Today violence can be ignited in the name religion, caste, country, nation, language, development. But you must understand that any civilization is an organization and there are rules and laws to govern that civilization. If there are rules and laws, there must be some who wish to break them and those who do so are also then punished."

"But why would one wish to break the rules of such a developed, cultured society?"

“So that life can remain evergreen; so that new civilizations can be born. If existing rules are not broken, new civilizations would never be born. We would stop exploring for new roads, new societies would never be created, and the old ones would begin to rot. Then what would be left—vacuum? But nature does not tolerate vacuum. Of course, a lot more is often not tolerated—like your roaming around alone!” She pointed to a security guard with a gun, staring at me. I rather liked it. Let no one visit this desolate place but still it was being well protected by the Pakistani government. I walk up to him, wish and praise his vigilance.

“Madam, I am not a guard of this place. We are here to keep an eye on you.”

“Doesn’t matter. This way you are getting to see your culture and your past.”

“Madam I am a Muslim and a believer. How can this habitation of the barbarians be my past?”

I force myself to walk away to avoid an argument with him. She passes me something green. It was a five rupee note that had the photograph of Mohammad Ali Jinnah on one side and the Mohenjo Daro on the other. “This is a note of 1948. It was in use till 1957. The late president had himself decided to have the picture of this site on it.”

How far has Pakistan traveled from the dreams of its founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah. I see Aslam sitting on the bench basking in the sun. Well he is welcome to it. I walk by quickly listening to the continuous call of the kite hovering over the site. Is that why someone had renamed it ‘city of the dead’.

“You shall not be able to find it; the kite. Bird do not venture near this place and they never ever shit over the excavations.” Irshaad Ali follows my gaze and informs me. I smile indulgently at the twenty year old boy’s yearning to impress the lone visitor he has had in several days.

“Do you know that people say birds do not shit over the Ka’aba as well. It is for the same reason.” I continue the conversation.

“Because it is sacred?” He knows his love for the place is fast turning towards adoration and he is still confused about allowing his being to move in the direction of choosing its own god.

I laugh, “No! because it is in the middle of a desert like this place, there are hardly any trees around and birds do not fly from one place to another for no rhyme or reason.”

Irshaad thinks a bit and then moves in another direction, “We used to come here as children; sometimes to play and sometimes to graze our sheep.” I sigh and resign myself. Men, whatever be their age keep trying to impress women. He continues, ‘you know there were big urns full of human bones lying all around the site. One of my friends took a bone home and hid it. He lost his mind and started having fits. Then a ‘najoomi’ was called and he said that a human bone had been removed from its rightful place. The whole house was hunted, the bone found, returned and the boy recovered.”

I give up. My level of patience has been receding as my years have increased, “How old are you Irshaad Ali?”

“Twenty” he replies shyly as if I was a match maker representing his ‘would be’ bride.

“And this site was excavated and practically combed almost 90 years ago. There is no documentation of urns of bone having been found here. Why lie when the truth is so exciting?”

Strangely enough the boy accepts this quietly; one can still harbor hopes from boys like him who think when questioned.

I tentatively reach out to the large, round, multi-coloured stones. They are smooth, polished and shiny. “Can you guess what they are?” she asked. “No. They have a hole in the centre, some holes go right through, some are just pits like pockmarks. Were they used for powdering wheat, spices?”

“Maybe. Some archeologists believe they are door hinges. But then several of them have smaller holes besides the bigger one. A new theory is that they were instruments for the study of astronomy.”

“Really! Did people know the sky and study the movement of the stars then?”

“Negotiating a boundless sea, how would a ship leave the Indian shore and reach Egypt without knowledge of the stars?”

I was still stroking the stones when Aslam strolls up. Lunch has been served. I still could not believe that I would be breaking bread in the oldest known civilization of this earth. Would the bread carry the flavor of the millennia gone by?

The fish has been caught from the Indus and is hot, sweet and tangy as only fresh water fish can be. Aslam is allergic to fish and has only keema to go with the roti. I feel sorry for him, for anyone who lives in the land of rivers and lakes and is allergic to fish. Then there are those who live bang on the rivers and insist on being vegetarian.

“Many of them took Buddha’s middle path. Called fish a vegetable.” She winks at me and my mouth falls open in surprise.

“A bone stuck in your throat? See, that is why I do not eat fish.”

“Shut up Aslam! It was the ‘wink’!

He hurriedly glances at the other diners uncomfortably, is relieved that they are busy with their food and decides that I should not be left alone.

I wash my hands and make my way to the museum upstairs. The display and categorization is the usual as in most museums but one thing is remarkable. All the showcases are lit with solar light; less destructive, more natural. Aslam makes a quiet observation on the huge canvas of the imagined city of Mohenjo Daro, “why aren’t there any trees in the city?”

“This is the modern concept of a city; just people, no life.” He nods and walks away. I was about to tell him that huge spaces exist between the living areas in the actual city. Maybe they were parks, gardens

or even small forests taken into the city like Moscow. But when do men have the time to wait for women to voice their thoughts. When have men thought it necessary to listen to women?

And then as I walk through the galleries, I see her standing there; in the same posture that she assumed when waiting for me to observe something, while giving her own version, one hand on the hip, the other resting on the knee that is slightly bent, like the *tribhanga* of the Indian classical dance, hair tied in a loose bun, long necked, arms full of bangles, thick lips and all of ten inches high. I was so happy to recognize her that I burst out laughing. The caretaker looks up surprised. He has been kind enough to allow me the use of my camera, while pointing out that he is breaking the rule in doing so but was willing to take the step since I was an Indian. Now he seems to be rethinking the decision. Then he shrugs his shoulders and calms down; after all this site is hardly ever visited by the 'sane'.

"Aha, so you are Sambhara, the dancing girl of Mohenjo Daro."

"I am a lot of things. I have been trying to explain to you but so far you have refused to understand me. I wonder if you ever shall"

"If you are Sambhara then you must know all the secrets of this place. Tell me when shall you open for me all the mysteries of this place?"

"When I shall be convinced that you are capable of knowing."

"So what proof shall I give of my capability?"

"It is really not about proof. All secrets open to the one who can face the truth fearlessly; to one who does not only take from life or gives it back, but also tries to modify it; one who does not live life but struggles to wrest open the closed fist of time and then shares the pain and the joys of that open fist. Can you honestly say that you have lived such a life?"

Seeing me silent she turns and strokes the ten centimeter big figurine of herself.

My night case is in the boot with Aslam's back pack and the drivers bag. I stand by the car looking out at the site. Aslam walks up and stand between me and my desires. He seems genuinely unhappy at the mix up of days and holding my hand promises to bring me to Mohenjo Daro again. I look beyond his shoulder at the silent civilization.

Just as one knows when love is gone from a relationship, an actor understands that there is a connect disability between him and the audience, when a scientist realizes that he has the degrees but not the madness, as surely as a woman knows that she is faking an orgasm, I know I shall never visit Mohenjo Daro again. A day miscalculated is a life gone by; promises are writings on water.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I am sad at leaving Mohenjo Daro a day before I was supposed to but happy that I shall be meeting Dr. Adeeb Rizvi in his habitat. I call his assistant and inform that I am on my way. The driver is angry at my not leaving the site immediately after receiving Dr. Adeeb's call. Also at being ignored and decides to take the most crowded route through Larkana. By the time Aslam wakes up to his mistake we are in the thick of small town Friday evening traffic. I turn a deaf ear to the arguing men and concentrate on the blaring music from horn thumping lorries, auto rikshaws and cycles. The most fascinating are the donkey carts. The donkeys in Sindh are smarter, look better fed, happier and so beautifully decorated; draped in embroidered cloth, foreheads adorned with golden or silver ornaments, festooned with silk tassels and bright coloured bobbles, their short necks encircled with a wreath of velvet flowers; they wait in the crowd, silent and patient, a cynical smile on their thick lips, calmly contemplating the desire of people to register their presence through the amount of noise they can create.

I love donkeys. Our house in Lucknow was close to the river and early in the mornings washer-men would pass by with their loaded donkeys. The loud braying of the donkeys often worked as an alarm clock for us. I admired them for having a mind of their own; not moving if they didn't want to, being cajoled, scolded and whipped by the masters but standing immobile digging in their heels because that is what they wished to do. How many times did I wish to be a donkey and assert my right to be. Those were staid, solemn beings, useful but not interesting. The ones in Sindh seem to be members of the family, loved and cared for, doing their portion of the work as every family member should. Seeing them I am reminded of the festooned camels in Jaisalmer. Women weave, embroider, knit and string the festoons that adorn the camel of their beloved. It is their way of asking the camel to take care of the one who rides it and to know from a distance when the lover approaches. Distance! Always there between the beloved and lover now increasing slowly between me and Mohenjo Daro. Someone pats my shoulder and I return to the donkeys. Rest of India mistreats and laughs at donkeys. I wonder about Sindhis. There is no time to stop and talk to ordinary, working people.

I had met Comrade Sobo Gianchandani only once in 2005. He had then invited me to Larkana, to stay with him and interview him. Last time I visited, the Pakistan High Commission had refused to include Larkana in the cities I could visit. A comrade informed that Comrade Sobo knew I had come and had waited for me. This time I had a visa for Larkana but he had decided to shift abode. "I have a treasure and no sword to protect it with and then I would have the sword and the treasure has been squandered away." Lines from a folk play of Himachal Pradesh resonate in my heart.

As a 19 year old boy Sobho had travelled from Larkana to Shantiniketan, Bengal. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore then 78 years old named him 'Mohenjo darorer Manush' or 'Man of Mohenjodaro.' Bengalis and Sindhis are very similar. The topography of their regions, language, dress, crops, seasons are in opposition, both love music, poetry and fish; more importantly they have a similar hankering and respect for learning, can talk for hours, are politically conscious and very vocal about their political opinion.

It was eminent communist leader Pannalal Dasgupta with whom he had long discussions and three years later, when he left Shantiniketan he had become a Marxist wishing to work for the poor and wage a struggle for independent India. He stayed committed to his cause till the end.

One of the harassments was arrest and imprisonment on doubt, with framed charges and no proof for any offence; court hearings followed and regular persuasion and threats to leave the country. Comrade Sobho became the face of the oppressed, the ones struggling for equality and fighting for democracy and trying to raise a voice of reason and logic as one army dictator after another tightened the iron grip over the masses. Several times he was put under house arrest, his movement restricted to Larkana, spent thirteen years imprisoned in various jails of Pakistan, called an Indian agent, a traitor of Pakistan, a Soviet spy but he continued to speak, write, organize and inspire.

In an interview he said, "For the Pakistani establishment, I am a three-headed monster — I am a communist, I am Hindu, and I am Sindhi; but I see light at the end of the tunnel, I will never give up."

I cannot write a soppy end to this relationship; as a fellow communist, I know he is gone, there may be hardships and difficulties in the path he chose but its beauty is that it never becomes well-trodden; often it forks out so much that it becomes quite lost. no matter, people keep walking it, making mistakes, ending up at wrong destinations, turning badly informed guides for the new entrants, yet the path remains and there is no farewell.

Larkaana to Sukker is about forty minutes; we reach in two and a half hours. I have received 9 calls from Dr Iqbal Daudpota, the young doctor who is in-charge for guiding me safely to Sukker and the hospital. The poor man is desperate and tries to direct the driver to clearer road not realizing that we are stuck at a railway crossing with the train plonked right before us, refusing to budge. Finally, the train clanks away, the crossing gate opens, and we reach the SIUT hospital in ten minutes. The closed main gates open for the car inviting curious glances from the long queues of people waiting to consult Dr. Adeeb who steps out himself to meet me. He is immediately surrounded by patients who think he is leaving and he pacifies them in Sindhi that he will be back in a short while.

How can my heart not warm to him? He is from my village and has learnt Sindhi to assimilate and be accepted so that he can reach out to the sick and the needy of the country of his choice. The Sindhis are proud people and love their language. One of the many problems I have with the migrants from India to Pakistan is that they made no effort to learn the language, appreciate Sindhi music, the Sufi philosophy so different from the mainstream Sufism. In fact, they have done what Ammi would summed up as "tu jote, beeje, rope, kaate, main khaun, soun, khaun soun", meaning "you plough, sow, irrigate and reap. I'll eat and sleep, eat and sleep.'

I am taken to Adeeb Bhai's personal room to wash and then round the hospital. The hospital is clean, extremely well maintained and highly equipped. To say that I am impressed would be an understatement. There are no private rooms, and everyone is treated equal, no OPD patient waits for more than ten minutes and no one in the emergency is unattended for more than three minutes. All this care and treatment is free! How is it managed? I am shown the room where 'Zakaat' is collected, the annual percentage that every Muslim is obliged to pay from his earnings. All over the world Muslims give this money to mosques, madrasas or dargahs where it is conveniently swallowed by the clergy. Dr. Adeeb Rizvi has been able to convince the Pakistani Muslim to donate to his hospitals. I have an aversion

to organized religion but some people like Dr. Adeeb Rizvi and Abdul Sattar Edhi can persuade religion to marry philanthropy.

His yearning for his village, his love for the Sindhi people, his addiction to work and commitment to his calling, all mark him out as a great man. His qualities are not limited to himself; there are the doctors who work under him and would willingly die for him, doctors who joined him as young men like Dr. Naqvi and are now in their seventies and not wishing to call it a day and then there are people like Jaffer bhai who believe that they are blessed because they have the good fortune to help him and his cause; his caliber includes the capacity to gather good people. He travels by the public transport to Sukker, the inter-city shuttle when he has the comfort of a car. He smiles and says that the train is still the more reliable of the two. The time on train is his opportunity to interact with people, to extend his understanding of the populace beyond the patients, to be able to talk to them as an equal, to put a finger on the pulse of society, and to be able to recruit people like Comrade Mushtaq who now works voluntarily with SIUT.

Comrade Mushtaq is not a doctor; he is an employee with the railways, probably a ticket checker who met Dr. Adeeb Rizvi on a Friday shuttle train. When found in two people commitment recognizes itself. The doctor asked the ticket checker to work in the hospital; a welfare health institution needs honest people more than a private hospital and good natured, polite ones to smoothen the ruffled feathers of the over worked staff. An institution that cannot afford to give current salaries can ill afford to let people walk away for better paid jobs. Comrade Mushtaq devotes all his free time to SIUT. He himself plans his work which is usually talking to the nursing and cleaning staff, hearing their problems, solving them at his level or asking the administrative staff to look into the issues. Dr. Adeeb Rizvi is seldom disturbed and Comrade Mushtaq is proud of the fact that he is helping in the cause of taking health services to the common man. He likes to repeat Dr. Rizvi's favorite sentences "if it is there, it is doable" and "no one should die because they cannot pay for the treatment."

Adeeb bhai comes out to the car with me. The day is ending and the crowd outside has doubled but it parts to make way for him reminding me vaguely of the parting of the Red Sea; time has always created a space for people who will it to do so. He kisses me on the cheek and hands me a gift. It is a replica of the bull from Mohenjo Daro. How does he know that I have been pulled away from the site? Maybe he knows one can never have enough of it and is trying in his own way to help me come to terms with my helplessness. We are family and kinships are about echoing the yearning of the other heart.

Sindh has a tradition of touching the feet of the elders, even in the Muslims. Dr Iqbal Daudpota bends down, I am not prepared and manage to stop him just in the nick of time. He seems happy with the hug I give but his eyes fill up when I say 'remain committed'. It is not a blessing, it is what every human being should demand of a fellow human being.

Aslam had got in touch with another comrade from Sukker. Comrade Zia Bhatti had turned up a while ago and had been talking to Aslam and Comrade Mushtaq while I was being shown the hospital. Now it is time for me to leave without having even greeted either of them properly. I look at them and extend my hand in helpless resignation. They smile and inform that they are accompanying us till the check post. "But how will you come back? Surely the check-post must be outside the town and-----." They check my blubbling with a raised hand which says, 'it shall be managed.'

It has always been friends and comrades who have 'managed' it so, that my life has been livable. Nine kilometers is packed with information on the peoples struggles, movements, the short lived power in the hands of the people, the usurpation by big capital, the lack of countering by the organized left, the absence of thought out strategies by the progressive liberals, the absence of trustworthy platforms, the dearth of leaders who can reach across communities, the half-hearted, often non-existent countering of religious fundamentalism, the deficient opposition to the high handed repression of movements of self-determination and the will of the masses to continue the fight for their rights. In between the two comrades show me the barges over the river Indus, the ones built by the British and the ones that have come up more recently.

We cross the raging Indus, I long to touch it. There are so many questions that she can answer, but there is no time. I do not have a visa for Sukker so I have to be out of the district before dark. Most of the time the answers are right there and can be just picked up, but usually there is no urge to bend down, a necessity for gaining anything worthwhile. Even they who are willing to bend often do not have the time to do so. In salvaging anything from the rushing river of life one requires not just the will to do so but also make time. I have spent twenty years in taking care of the house, looking after an irritating, loud, talkative husband, raising three children, perhaps the only achievement I can show for those years. Twenty years went by with my not living them. Insomnia was the only boon I had and how I cherished it; reading and sometimes writing through nights. Such close associates did we become that I can physically feel it moving closer as night approaches, I can sense it in the few minute catnaps that came my way, shutting out everything for a few seconds. People around often think my mind is wandering, I know it is sleep trying to help insomnia. I become joyous and happy in the evenings; often called *nishachar* (nocturnal) and other terms that turn derogatory when attached to a woman and praise when said about a man; 'professor' is another such term; a man with mangled hair, scrawny beard, unkept appearance looks like a 'professor', a sufi, a saint! A woman who goes about like this is plain 'crazy.'

I can hear the river gushing by. I would sell my soul to get down and have a dip in its water. The river that has never been holy but has blessed the people with sparkle and energy to devise the course of life. They tell me of the ancient canals and the huge region they watered, making this a land of plenty and a target of attacks by outsiders; the benevolence of the river and the land it watered in accepting the outsiders, allowing them to live and learn, tying their feet to the ground so that their minds could achieve freedom. The river that man wishes to tie down as Kala Bagh Dam, a blocking that would drown age-old villages, kill traditional crafts and arts, destroy the civilization and benefit only one portion of Pakistan. The bridges, the canals, the benevolence of a free river and mans greed to treat it like the golden egg laying duck and kill it to possess the storehouse of gold eggs.

I hear all this and allow it to sink in. I know of a similar capturing and confining of river in India. The Narmada converted into the Sardar Sarovar Dam; hundreds of villages have drowned, thousands have lost their livelihood, people from sowing and reaping and dancing away their hunger have turned rikshaw pullers and daily wagers. Big projects seldom benefit the masses, the state always asks the poor to sacrifice for the 'larger good' when what it really mean is 'sacrifice for the rich and the 'haves'.

Indus and Narmada are like the mothers who when being led to the gallows to fulfil the death sentence manage to profit the progeny. The people have come together to protest, across class a unity has come into being; the uprising has been crushed in India but in Pakistan the Kala Bagh Dam has been put on hold.

This is Comrade Zia Bhatti explaining what is being planned by an urban, short sighted, western educated government. He sighs and caps his explanation with "Well we win some and we lose some! "

I feel the warmth in her eyes as they rest on Comrade Zia Bhatti. I see without her pointing out to me that he is wearing an old coat and the collar is frayed. He works in the revenue department where corruption is high, and every employee is said to be coated in gold within a few years of service. I recall that not one Member of Parliament belonging to the Left in India was accused in the various scams that came to light in the last few years in India and had been the undoing of the Congress Party in the last elections. I have met Comrade Zia Bhatti just now and shall probably not meet him again ever, but I have known him all my life. It has been people like him and Comrade Mushtaq who have kept alive my faith in humanity.

We pass by the site for Dr. Adeeb's new hospital. It is a huge piece of land and the hospital would again be free and super-equipped.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The day was already moving towards a bleak dusk when we left the Hospital. Aslam had been stupid enough to inform Dr. Adeeb that we planned to visit the Sindhi Saint Sachal Sarmast's Dargah. He had been up in arms ordering Aslam to head straight back to Karachi and not stop anywhere. The highway is alive with dacoits who now ride big cars and trucks, attacking with speed and vanishing like lightening. I mumble that it would be an adventure and am publicly scolded by Dr. Adeeb who calmed down only when Aslam had agreed with him.

We stop at the check-post and Comrade Zia and Comrade Bhatti get down quickly, wave and begin to walk backwards. I am worried for them. 'they shall manage' says Aslam casually. "yes, just as you shall manage the Sachal's Dargah" My anger is now acidic.

“That is where we are headed” he answers coolly, “didn’t you see that we have turned away from the highway?”

“But you promised Dr. Adeeb that-----”

“Dr. Adeeb is behind, Sachal lies ahead. One should always look ahead.”

I am relieved and apologetic, ““Sorry. My coming to Mohenjo Daro is the same as Haj for someone. I am unhappy that the ritual I had defined has not been completed” Aslam nods sagely. I do not know if he understands but he has accepted me with my eccentricities and makes space for them.

Shachal Sarmast wrote poetry in 7 languages but most of all in [Sindhi](#). He was born in [Daraza](#), near [Ranipur](#), Sindh, named Abdul Wahab which was soon changed to "Sachal" or "Sachoo" or the 'truthful one', because he roamed carefree, the word 'sarmast' or 'ecstatic' was soon added to it. His poetical works are sung by local singers in [Sindhi](#) and [Saraiki](#).

Sindhi culture is seeped in classical music and a compilation of his works includes an explanation of the melodic modes or [Raga](#) called ‘Sur’ in Sindhi that are used in Sachal's poetry proving that philosophy has to take on the garb of poetry and music to make inroads into the heart, mind and soul of the masses. Ragas exist as friends in the region and cannot be forsaken. That is perhaps the reason why the Guru Granth Sahib also has a Raga prescribed for every Shabad.

It is already dark when we reach the shrine, but it is alive with people. Sindhis do not specify a time to visiting a dargah; the shrines are places to pray, think and make wishes; they are also fun spots where people just walk in, listen to music, meet friends, make new ones and if there is no one around then there is the Sufi Saint to befriend all over again. I wish I had reached here while it was daylight. A senior writer friend had once told me to judge places by the way they approach the dark. The opportunity is almost never given to women in the east, who must be inside their boring homes before dark. I think it is society trying to sabotage women’s thought process.

What I see in the dark and the sparsely lit areas is a huge mausoleum covered with a maze of tiny blue tiles interlaced with red and gold to offset the hues of blue. Outcates of morality, needed by the rulers, loved by the masses it seems only right to have the Sufi saints attired in blue, the colour representing the Dalit struggle in India. Two copper bells, strung together hang at the door. In Sindh often people ring them as a silent reminder of a composite culture. Oddly enough they are not shaped like the temple or the church bells, sophisticated, heavy and shining; they are beaten copper, roughly shaped in cylinders, reminder of times when we had just discovered music caged inside a bell and persuaded it to reveal itself by giving the bell a tongue. So where have I seen them before? Why do they seem so familiar? I smile at them as if to acknowledge their long association with my part of the world as I recall that they are bells hung in the necks of goats and sheep, helping the shepherd keep track of his herd but also creating melodies that resonate across the meadows of the Himalayas.

In the vague visit to the shrine of Sachal Sarmast that is the only thing that finds a hook and hangs on in my memory, the bells- a continuity from the past, a desire to maintain the link and not get lost in the

vacuum of present; a people's musical instrument, melodious, characterizing a poet both philosophical and grounded!

Khairpur dates are different. They have a stronger firmer skin so that a pile of dates does not get mushy and lumpy. Each one is separate, full of soft, juicy pulp and a much smaller seed than found in their Indian cousins. But the Arab onslaught is visible here as well. Despite the richness and flavor of the local fruit the vendors lining the highway offer us packets stamped with Saudi Arabia, Madina and Mecca.

For the love of humanity South Asians, do have some sense of pride. Why would one stop in Khairpur for dates if one wanted the Saudi, dark, cockroachy ones? Aslam's Sindhi nationalism rescues us as he insists on being sold the local ones and we are grudgingly handed a packet each of plain and almond filled dates. They are half the price of the 'Haji ones' and we buy more. Though having made the same money the seller does not seem pleased.

We are on the road again, this time heading straight to Karachi. We pass by the turning that leads to Bhit Shah. Aslam need not have bothered pointing it out to me; I am not nostalgic about it, just as I would not have the aching pain for Mohenjo Daro if I had visited the sites discovered within the 20 km radius by R.D.Bannerji. If I had had that one day that was scratched away from my calendar.

But I am sorry for not meeting Dr. Harish and poet Gada Hussain Khaskhaili. He is from a practicing Sufi family. I am told that though illiterate his poetry collection "Amn Muhinjo Tarano (Peace my Anthem) is soon to be published. Harish belongs to the minority community in Pakistan; as a communist it was important to meet him and express solidarity. He had agreed to step outside the city and meet us on the Highway. Gada Husain had kissed my hand in our last meeting. This time I wanted to kiss his eyes that are fast losing their vision, just to tell him that it is his heart that is his guiding light to the 'truth', the failing eyesight is unimportant. He would probably not have believed me but anyway now the opportunity is lost.

I huddle in a corner and try to think all that I have had to let go in this visit. Visiting Pakistan is always problematic; the visa is granted for specific cities, it may or may not have the police reporting exemption stamp, the visa usually comes at the last minute, forcing one to scamper through travel bookings, buying presents, informing friends and invariably making some close ones angry for not informing them so they could send gifts for their loved ones.

India, not to be out done treats Pakistani visitors the same.

One can only shrug at this state of affairs, since one cannot change them. But as the number of visits grow so does the pile of regrets. This time it borders on remorse.

CHAPTER NINE

I had always believed that one should visit Pakistan to meet Sindhis, Punjabis, Baloch and Pakhtuns. Mohajirs are invariably drawn to visitors from India, maybe because they have not been assimilated in

the country of their choice or maybe because they have themselves not intended to assimilate. A very close friend had been invited to attend a wedding in Karachi. She had never met the portion of family that had migrated to Pakistan and during the ceremonial rituals she was introduced to everyone who attended. She soon realized that all the people attending the wedding were relatives and asked in all innocence "Are only relatives invited to weddings here? Where are the friends?" an old uncle replied to her query "But the clan is so big, why should we invite others" She had looked at him a long while and answered "Your clan would have been even bigger had you stayed on in India. Why go to all this trouble if you only wished to mix within your family?"

This had been my attitude too till I met Zahida Hina, the well-known fiction writer; the woman who openly stands with the Sindhis in their struggle for recognition of their language, but continues to miss and write about Sahaswan, Bihar. Unashamed of her oscillating loyalties, she is a citizen of the Earth and behaves like one. Often caught opposing the left and progressive groups she does not allow the regressive or communal forces to even think that she is on their side. She is my kind of a woman and this time I meet her daughter Sohana. A painter and graphic designer by profession she has chosen not to get married in a society that has no space for single women. I would have so loved to spend a night with them, just the three of us, chatting, informing, laughing, opening our hearts knowing what we say would dissolve in the coffee and become a part of our souls, surfacing in a glance exchanged across a crowded room, secrets meaningless to anyone but to us, fertilizers for the tree of bonding.

Back in Karachi it is time for some fun because I'll meet Haris and Noorulain, the girl he is to marry. Haris still has the slightly surprised expression but it has turned somewhat inwards. He is surprised at himself and a bit bemused. My fondness for him grows. I like people who look at themselves from the outside; these are the ones who are continuously engaged in a debate within; my experience is that they are trustworthy and make very good friends. I still have to meet Noorulain.

We are in the midst of a deep conversation on Buddhist art when he barges in. I must admit that I am biased against North Indian Muslims settled in Hyderabad (Deccan). The 'upper class' are migrants from Uttar Pradesh who have refused to merge with the milieu they adopted, don't know a word of Telegu, speak Urdu with an affected tone, think of Hyderabadis as dark, uncultured and almost never marry outside their clans. Sounds familiar? The people from central India are the most self-obsessed, be they Muslims or Hindus; they did not mix with the Bengalis in Bangladesh, with Sindhis in Pakistan or Telegu in Hyderabad. I do not like meeting relatives; I suppose some of them must be wonderful people but 'blood' is not a bonding I've looked for. Syeds all over the world claim to be related. I do not know how but the Zaheers and the Bilgiramis of Hyderabad(Deccan) are related. A large part of this clan migrated to Pakistan and have done fairly well for themselves; this particular gentleman has a chain of restaurants and an art gallery or maybe it is the other way round. He is patronizing in his inquiry of why I am here; no, he is not interested in Literature Festivals because he does not like to read; politics has never been his scene because he doesn't trust politicians. I discretely look at my watch. He has been here exactly seven minutes. Time is fluid, it can flow by like a gushing mountain stream or become stagnant like an abused village pond. I decide quickly; it is time to test Noorulain who has escaped to the kitchen. I excuse myself, have a whispered conversation with her and am back, with a 'will she, won't she' knocking in my heart. In a couple of minutes Noorulain appears; all flustered and rushed off her feet

inquiring how soon would I be free to accompany her. I quickly say 'five minutes'; The gentleman understands that he cannot sit longer than that. Every woman enjoys a bit of acting but more than that every woman loves the concept of 'sisterhood' and the element of 'conspiracy' that goes with it. Noorulain is dependable. My heart warms to her.

The same evening Comrade Lateef Mughal comes to meet me and brings Habeeb Junaidi, a trade union leader. Saeed Ghani a PPP Senator had sent me an Ajrak through him. Saeed Ghani is the son of late Usman Ghani, a Trade Union Leader of a bank who had organized protests opposing the privatization of banks in Pakistan. Comrade Usman Ghani had been killed in ambush. Every Ajrak is dear to me but this one carries the fragrance of the embers of protest that smoulder across nations, lie dormant for long periods and then suddenly burst into flames in the hearts of people yearning for justice and equality, leading them to hold demonstrations, sit on hunger strikes and embrace martyrdom.

I had been meaning to discuss the PIA strike with someone who knows the state of labor unions in Pakistan and Habeeb Junaidi seemed just the person who can update me on past events and future plan of action for labor unity fighting the globalization and a democratically elected government that has sold its soul to the corporates. Pakistan has been long into the concept of open markets while India has only just begun to open itself and seems in a hurry to catch up. Maybe there are lessons to be learnt from the neighbor. Habeeb Sahab however is ill at ease with the subject and quickly arrives at the end point stating that the trade union movement is over and done with and for all practical purposes it is dead in Pakistan. I am nonplussed at the finality of his statement but press on asking him how it can be revived?

"There is no possibility of reviving it! Look at the PIA strike; we did not even have the strength to give a call for a day long 'Karachi Bandh' in solidarity with the striking workers."

"But would it not have been better to announce such a solidarity, if only to assess your following?"

"And have fallen flat on our face? That would have been such a disgrace!"

"There might have been some shutter-downs, some support. It would have told you where you had a foothold and could build a base and where you have no presence you could have begun work!"

"But think of the dishonor, the shame-----!" He continues speaking as a voice heard years back suddenly leaps out of the depths of discarded memories "People shall have a revolution despite the communist party." Was it the leadership that had given up on protest to highlight the demands and grievances of the masses? Did it mean that they did not believe that the issues concerning the workers were issues that mattered? Why was it still the leadership then? Is leadership in the left also being maneuvered and manipulated like that in the bourgeois parties? Has the 'cause' shifted from struggle for equality to a struggle for maintaining hierarchical positions in the leadership.

I give up. Who am I to decide who is right and would my opinion be objective?

CHAPTER NINE

Next day I am to have lunch at Hasan Mansoor's house. A journalist and a fellow short story writer, Hasan likes to look down because he knows that he has piercing eyes that bely the plump, baby face. I had requested a typically Sindhi meal, something that had been denied to me in all these visits. Except for the roasted Hilsa or Palla as the fish is called in Sindh, brought especially for me by Comrade Mir Mohammad Talpur in 2006, I have never tasted a single Sindhi dish. A race is known by its literature, music, art and food. Sindh has come a topper in the first three. Punjabi cuisine often wrongly called Mughlai has taken over everywhere but I have been promised an authentic Sindhi one by Hasan.

We begin with Tarial machchhi with daddar ji chatni, roasted fish with green tamarind chutney, followed by Garhay chanwran ji mani which is bread made of red rice with sai macchi jo bhor and Kukarh Thoom, chicken in garlic greens, fish in rich gravy, rounded off with saanan jo saao, prawn pulao in green spices with Bajia made of green gram ground to a paste, mixed with onions and fried like cutlets. Every dish is delectable, with just the right amount of spices tingling the taste buds, acquainting them to the novelty of flavors but never once becoming overpowering or aggressive. It is my kind of food, where the spices are sublime, and taste of the meat and vegetable is not drowned in oil and spices.

Zahida, Hasan's wife has cooked everything herself and serves it with so much love that I remember the way my mother would make me eat when I came home for vacations. Midway through the meal their two children return from school. The girl is plump and smiling, with Hasan's eyes. Zahida immediately embarks on a long tale of all that she is doing to keep the girl slim. I was fat in my childhood and quite an embarrassment to my elder sisters who were forever telling me to eat less. We look at each other, the girl of ten, the woman of fifty eight and know we are friends. The son is older, thin and trying his best to not appear naughty.

Zahida wants me to stay with them next time I am in Karachi. I do not know if I shall ever be back but what I do know is that I can walk into this house anytime and demand that I be given love and affection. It is a wonderful feeling to be part of a family that is so warm so effortlessly.

While planning this visit I had decided to stay away from the Progressive Writers Association of Pakistan. It is divided into several factions with each claiming to be the legitimate one. I do not wish to get into the controversy. Raahat Sayeed had emailed me suggesting that I meet a group of writers in Karachi. Dr. Jaffer had also called. It is strange how a platform for writers is being organized, factionalized and conducted by non-writers. I am also curious about the platforms or groups of Sindhi, Baloch, Pakhtoon writers in Karachi. Since I can never hope to get a visa for Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa or Balochistan I would like to meet the writers in Karachi. So much inner turmoil and no literature produced! I fail to understand or believe this. I make a straight request to Raahat Sayeed; if he can arrange a meeting with Baloch or Pakhtoon or Kashmiri writers I shall be happy to attend the meet. He does not reply. I understand that the PWA in Pakistan has made no effort to reach out to these writers. I recall that I had made a similar demand from my Nepali comrades and they had flooded me with poems, stories, paintings, short films produced during the ten year long civil war that raged through Nepal. Why is the PWA of Pakistan not reaching out to writers voicing these issues and concerns?

In India I have seen that PWA does not concern itself with the spontaneous people's movements. Over the decades there has been no policy discussion or thrust towards inclusiveness; there is no concern for the LGBTQ, no major work on the farmers suicides that are multiplying; no discussion on feminism and no effort to compile and collect the literature emerging from the troubled states, the so called 'insurgencies.'

Maybe PWA has become mainstream; maybe all movements over a period of time get absorbed into the mainstream, perhaps one should accept that movements like everything else have a life and once that life is over what is left is the organizations with its pressures of conferences, elections and office bearers; a static, stationary body that fulfills the demands of metabolism but cannot be said to be alive.

Raahat Saeed had ignored me throughout the Literature Festival, wishing me only when we came face to face in the food park. Dr. Jaffer is present in the lecture at Dr. Adeeb's SIUT and we chat afterwards. He has several books to his credit and though I am no one to comment seems to be doing quite some work in academics.

I begin by thanking the medical community for the solidarity it had shown to the various people's struggles that have taken place in Pakistan, right from the fifties when medical students went on strike down to the eighties when the regime of Zia-ul-Haq repressed every effort to build mass movements. I am speaking at SIUT, Dr. Adeeb Rizvi's Hospital. From the two hundred doctors present I know many of them are not even aware of the association of the medical fraternity with organized fights that happened on the streets. Most of them do not care. This has been one of the great achievements of capitalism that it has successfully segregated professions and isolated movements so much so that an unemployed urban youth protesting in the streets of a state capital does not think to align with demonstrating farmers, completely forgetting the fact that everyone has to eat to survive. Thus, every fight for justice remains a solitary battle of individual tussle, and never turns into a war for change in the system. That is a loss of the left as well that it has not been able to forge a solidarity that reaches across farmers, factory workers, doctors, teachers and others. One has to keep revisiting history even at the cost of boring the post globalization younger generation for a while and keep discussing the far reach of unity across professions because a just society is the long term goal of every leftist.

I am pleased at the effect my not wanting to wish away globalization has. Some seem a bit perturbed as I talk of globalization in favourable terms. Why is everything getting judged through economics? Can't one have a world, wish for a world that is coming closer without the nearness translating itself into money? Isn't it a proximity that Dr. Adeeb can immediately consult surgeons in UK, USA; one of the fall outs of globalization should be easy access to knowledge; but it is not happening that way; everything is getting weighed in money and the Left that should be forward looking, is only resisting change. Why haven't they been able to grab the opportunity of globalization to unite workers; why is the right continuing to use globalization as a means of exploitation of workers?

Frankly I am a bit perturbed by the way Communist Parties the world over and South Asia in particular, have frittered away a life sent opportunity of organizing labour unions that could form cohesions across borders and have kept big capital subservient to labour. While the states in South Asia went across to

make deals with big capital, giving them tax holidays, right to pollute the rivers and cut down forests we did not force the governments to put down any condition to protect the rights of the labour. With the result that the hard earned 8 hour day, weekly off, minimum wage, medical and skill enhancing benefits, provident fund and pensions all went out of the window. These were not favors or donation being given by the governments, these were the rights of the workers won after a lot of battles and in lieu of having contributed to the economy of the state for so many years. These rights cannot be usurped just because somebody descends with a huge capital. It was also a fact that most of the European countries had opted for a welfare state to keep people's revolutions at bay. If states wished to keep bloody uprisings, civil wars and anarchism in check they must opt for welfare system. And if the left was half-hearted about a complete upheaval then it must hold out the same 'revolution' as a threat to democratically elected governments so corporates never get an upper hand.

Some doctors leave for their regular rounds, others rush out to answer emergency calls, many enter in the green gowns of operation theatres; it is proof of how quickly the human brain can shift from one plane to another and function on several levels simultaneously. It is fulfilling, the merging of discussion and work; over tea afterwards Dr. Adeeb Rizvi explains how urinary treatment is cheapest in India and even though he keeps trying for collaboration, something or the other stops the alliance from becoming a reality between the two neighbours, "Globalization not working here" I murmur. He laughs and adds "It will, it will, we shall keep trying! Remember our motto is "We cannot let them die because they can't afford to live."

He is an achiever who started with nothing; who am I to question his efforts? In the absence of the will of the state and the lack of awareness of the masses, people like Dr. Adeeb are the elixir for the dying.

A talk has been arranged at SZABIST. While dealing with conventional subjects this institute also offers its students a variety of courses ignored by the mainstream institutions. It is a place where interactions and dialogue is a possibility. I am also to speak on the marginalized in India. Maybe the organizer Dr. Riaz Shiekh expected me to speak about the Muslims in India and the organized targeting and mob attacks. However, my concern for the moment are institutes that are being targeted with a vengeance and the age-old victimization of Dalits and Adivasis. While I am in Pakistan, Kanhaiyya, a Ph.D. scholar and President of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Student Union has been arrested for organizing a discussion on Kashmir. Other student leaders and representatives have gone underground. I am worried sick about my daughter Pankhuri who is also a research scholar at JNU and an activist. Thankfully there has been news that the Left and progressive forces across parties and organizations have come together to protest the public smothering of dissent. It is a time to speak about the unity of all thinking, broadminded people; it is time to stand up for India as we see her and not as the right wing would make her. Dalits, tribes and minorities all have a role to play and I cannot stand with one and not talk of the other.

Shahnaz Wazir Ali who chaired speaks warmly about the amount of information in the talk. The round of questions is limited and I wonder if the audience is disappointed. Pakistan Secular Society had jointly organized the talk and I know that they are working not just for the Hindus but also the women, dalits and the tribes in Pakistan. It was wonderful to meet Karamat Ali sahib after a long gap and be

introduced to Zain Alavi and Dr Haroon a leading psychiatrist who has helped a number of political prisoners come to terms with life beyond the jail in Pakistan.

I had met her briefly at the Karachi Literature Festival. She was part of a discussion on reclaiming and restoring heritage sites and was very vocal about the shoddy way restoration is being carried out both by NGOs and the State. She is young, energetic, non-appeasing and no-nonsense kind of person. How does she survive? Dr. Asma Ibrahim is Director of the Museum and Art Gallery Department, State Bank of Pakistan.

A PhD in Numismatics specializing in Indo-Greek coins in Sindh and Balochistan she was given the boring task of establishing Pakistan's first state-of-the-art Monetary Museum and setting up an art gallery. Once denied the right to visit excavations because 'women did not do so' she is now part of innumerable exploratory and excavation trips and helped establish the Oxford University Press Museum, the Sindh Police Museum and the Mukhi House Museum.

She was also the one who proved that the Mysterious Mummy of a Persian Princess was a fake. This Mummy was claimed to be of an ancient Persian princess, over 2,600 years old, wearing an exquisite golden crown and mask, encased in a carved stone coffin placed inside a wooden sarcophagus and was up for sale for ten million dollars! Till Asma Ibrahim proved that it was of a young woman killed with a blunt object not earlier than 1996.

Sometimes I am left wondering if we South Asians are compulsive liars, or do we love the adventure of creating stories? In my heart it is often the story that wins as it does when I visit the Pakistan's first Monetary Museum. Working in the National Museum of Pakistan for 16 years as an assistant curator and not getting a single promotion for being a woman Asma was finally given charge of the Monetary Museum; in reality she was shelved for good till the day of her retirement. But she is a woman and gets down to unwinding history like a work of fiction. Isn't that what women have done for centuries? Create stories to preserve facts and narrate reality as fiction so it can survive?

The museum traces the monetary history from 600 BC to 2014, with not a single year missing. There are stamps, currencies and currency printing plates as well in the collection and there are documentaries and murals. Asma herself takes me around and seems to be enjoying herself as much as I am. There is a twinkle in her eye as she elaborates on the switch from god's image on coins to the persona of kings and the head of states. I join her in her amusement, laughing at men who always wished to be gods. Coins are procured from all over the world, private collectors and excavations. She can identify a coin by touch and lab testing is done only when doubts about dating arise. The museum is open and free for the public, holds summer camps for children of 3 to 15 years teaching them the art of calligraphy, traditional arts and crafts and organizing treasure hunts!

The success of the Monetary museum has changed the attitude of people who now want to set up museums without state support and Asma is willing to lend them a hand any time. The most recent one being the Oxford Press Museum and Archives, which is about the history of their publications.

Her sorrow at the state of Mohenjo Daro is genuine “---- 20 years!” she answers even before I have completed the question of how long the site would last. She sighs and continues “Water-logging and salinity pose a grave threat to the foundation of the city and its walls will soon crumble down. The site needs a conservation master plan. The same goes for Makli. Both Mohenjo Daro and Makli are the most valuable heritage sites we have. I am yet to see any government allocate funds on their preservation in a proper scientific manner.”

Underwater archeology is what she is preparing for now because the Indus Delta changes its course every 60 years and she has a gut feeling that there are lots of sites along the delta and the Sindh coastline; some may be pre-historic sites. “It is a hugely rich, undiscovered area, beyond one’s imagination!” There is no funding in sight, the government is not interested, the officials treat it as a huge joke and I have this uncontrollable impulse to kiss her inner eye, the one that shows her these dreams; but she has already moved to the world of ‘dreality’, a land where dreams and reality play musical chairs.

The museum gifts every visitor a souvenir, a small packet of shredded currency notes. Mud tablets excavated from the pre-historic sites in Mehargarh, Balochistan seem to wink from display boxes; a Bengali proverb floats by “ taka maati, maati taka”, money is dust and dust is money!

CHAPTER TEN

The repairs are over, restoration is complete, and Frere Hall is open to public. But we arrive late. It has just been closed for lunch. While Aisha and Aslam are outraged and discuss why these community domains are restricted by irrelevant rules, I talk to the gatekeeper, who points out the receding figure of the museum caretaker trudging away to the canteen; I run after him shouting ‘Sir! Sir! Wait!’ A word of advice for Indians travelling to Pakistan; wear a sari and a bindi. Pakistanis are curious about India, appreciative of Indians flaunting their culture and will be polite and approachable to a woman from the neighboring country. This gentleman stops, pays attention to about two and a half sentences and is walking back with me, rattling the museum keys in his pocket forsaking lunch, tea or whatever he was aiming for; he is already telling me about the museum.

Frere was a British administrator who promoted the economic development of [Sindh](#); more importantly he made [Sindhi](#) the language of administration in Sindh, rather than Urdu or [Persian](#).

The building completed in 1865 is made primarily of local yellow-toned limestone, is imposing and one is awestruck by the [Venetian-Gothic](#) style that blends elements of the European with local architectural elements. There are the multiple pointed arches, ribbed vaults, flying buttresses and most walls and pillars are covered with mosaic designs. This is the outside, which also has the lush green lawns, beautifully designed, carefully tended flower beds and graveled paths! But it is the inside that leave one gaping.

The hall's ceilings are decorated by the world-renowned Pakistani artist [Sadequain](#) in the 1980s and is a modern Islamic version of The Creation supposedly inspired by the Creation in the Sistine Chapel. Several other works by Sadequain are found in the hall, there are also reproductions of other paintings

by Sadequain and together they form the "Galerie Sadequain." There are the period photographs on the walls and the basement is a library that contains innumerable rare manuscripts of Urdu literature and archives of old newspapers. This is not a place to visit or see; it is a place to sit and work.

(no mention of Baloch restaurant where you, I and Ayesha had lunch)

It is my last day in Karachi and the Chaukhandi tombs are an early [Islamic cemetery](#) just outside Karachi, remarkable for their elaborate sandstone carvings. I have the time but no one knowledgeable to accompany me to the site. I almost change my plans and am planning a lazy morning. Haneef Dil Murad Baloch appears like an apparition every time I want to see a place that no one is interested in. We share a strange bond of being fascinated by the obscure. He was with me at Mangho Peer during my last visit. Aslam as I found out then is a 'peoples' person; he was with me but had no clue about Mangho Peer; this time too Aslam arranges the cab but does not know anything about the site. Haneef Dil Murad has an apt name. He is the answer to the desire (murad) of my heart (dil).

We pick him up from Malir just outside Karachi and on the way, he fills me up on the site, the lack of preservation work and the encroachments by travel and construction companies; the land has not been swallowed up by builders, not yet, but that is where they park their trucks, lorries and buses. The churning of dust and sulphuric diesel fumes are of course doing wonders for the old grave stones. This is a mixed graveyard of Sindhi Jakhio tribes and many Baloch tribes. In a region where tribal rivalry commands the cultural and social set up this composite cemetery speaks volumes about the Sindh Baloch relationship. Built mainly during [Mughal](#) rule most of the graves are of the buff-colored [sandstone](#), which probably received some chemical treatment or tempering since it has kept remarkably well over time in the arid climate. Interestingly the tombs are embellished with figural representations such as mounted horsemen, hunting scenes, arms, and jewelry; proof of a people converted in religion trying to maintain their cultural expression.

What is Chaukhandi? Name of a place, an architectural term, a square piece of land, an umbrella supported on four pillars? Scholars are unclear about the original age and history of Chaukhandi tombs. The word is used to refer to square structures like the [Chaukhandi Stupa](#) in [Sarnath](#). I am interested in the yellow beige stones used for the graves. It is not locally mined but there is a long history of masons and sculptors who traveled from Baluchistan and Rajasthan, who mined, transported and carved the stones that mark these sepulchers. More fascinating is the fact that these stones are found only on tombs and not in the living quarters here, but make up the palaces in Jaisalmer and Bikaner in Rajasthan. Did the Muslims give more importance to their dead than the living? Did they wish to create that difference?

"Or maybe it is just a simple explanation! Hindu philosophy celebrates life and allows the dead to depart?" She says it quietly, more to herself than to me.

"You give a lot of importance to philosophy!"

"And you never connect life and philosophy"

“well my ideology has taught me this; philosophers tell you what life is, but---”

“-----main thing is how to change it”

“You obviously know your Marx”

“And you have forgotten Buddha.”

“I haven’t! I am looking for Buddhism in everything; in motifs, designs, carvings, writings, architecture----.” I stop at her despondent expression; she seems a bit forlorn; not sad, but a bit melancholy; when one has arrived at a decision, but it is hurting to act on it.

“Looking is not observing and probing is not questioning”

“when I question, you are upset and scold me; when I accept you are sad!”

“Accusations put people on the defensive, questioning opens debate with others and with yourself. You make no difference between the two.” She moves away, not wishing to burden a friend with one’s problems. “Will I see you in Lahore?” I keep step with her. She stops, looks at me in the eye “yes!” The surge of joy at the rendezvous is overtaken by a strange disquiet that surrounds my heart. Why?

CHAPTER 11

Some four generations ago, the parents had taken over the charge of deciding a profession for their sons. This is specific to South Asia where sons are considered assets and hence taken good care off. This is not the case with daughters who are expected to marry and take care of the husbands and his family. Most women comply, and society happily continues to strut around showing off its new garb of modernity. Once in a while, a woman looks inwards and finds a withered, shrunken object, shriveled and gasping its last breaths. Most decide that since it is almost there, it is best to let it die; what use is a bit of trash? Rare is the woman compelled to open the doors of her being to save the dying soul!

Saeeda Diep is such a woman! Married at a young age Diep moved to the United States with her husband who like all men wanted a son though he put on a mask of the prevailing modernism that claims to treat every child equally. But these masks are not durable, and three daughters were all that it would take to crumble. Diep in the meantime had found that her soul needed her more than the moral facades. The husband left Diep for another woman; Diep sighed in relief and got down to giving her complete attention to her soul. Work in slums, women’s rights, support to LGBTQs, struggle and protests against Hudood laws and peace initiatives in particular with India, marked her out as a woman with an expanding soul. A few years on she planted bits of her soul in each of her daughter and set them free. She was quickly marked out and harassment began. Her small office is often broken in, documents and computers destroyed, people visiting her are stopped and questioned, her colleagues are threatened, her friends hounded, and the bullying and intimidation continues. Even as I write this, she has been detained in her office for planning candle light vigil for Salman Taseer martyred for his stand

against blasphemy laws; and one of her colleagues picked up from her office has been missing for almost a month now. She fights on. She is one of the marvels of Lahore.

I am in awe of her and proud that she calls me 'comrade.'

It is a lucky coincidence that she is in Karachi for a meeting with some other activists and returning on the same flight as me to Lahore. We meet at the airport, travel together and then I am in her car going to her house. I feel all of my body emptying its blood into my heart as she says, 'you always have a home in Lahore Noor.' In her house we have hardly brought down the suitcases from the car when she hands me a steaming mug of some red brew. "Drink up! I noticed that you are coughing. It is the effect of excessive speaking." It tastes of herbs and honey and strangely enough of Ammi. It is Joshanda that Ammi would force down our sore throats in winter. Concern is not selective; one cannot care for slums dwellers, women prisoners, missing activists and not care for friends, environment, animals, arts! She is already checking on the packets of frozen meat and chicken in the refrigerator for the big dinner she is planning for day after tomorrow. I would have preferred time with her, but I understand that she cannot sit idle and talk even with a close friend must have a direction; she must always be doing something, helping someone, meeting people.

Diep is gone by the time I am dressed next morning. Lassi and Parantha is waiting for me. The butter laced morsel melts in my mouth bringing me memories of Bhatinda, Ludhiana and Amritsar. I recall the yearning Bengalis have for Sol fish of Padma River. Punjab and Bengal! "We sacrificed the most for the independence, so both Bengal and Punjab had to be divided; it was a precaution to check further movements and struggles." Urdu writer Rattan Singh's old eyes mirror the horror, suffering and loss of partition. I sigh and push back the memory; it is over and done with and we have to concentrate on the present. Diep returns; she had to help a woman file a bail application for her brother.

Mahboob Akhtar lives in Defense. There is a Defense residential area in every city of Pakistan. It is developed by the army and then resold to the public; I had not realized that Mahboob sahib was this rich; Diep smiles as I voice my surprise and whispers 'who isn't? Education is business here!' "Isn't it everywhere?" I whisper back just as Mahboob sahib and his beautiful wife come out to greet us. Amjad Minhas is also there and the discussion turns to politics which is another business. I was happy that Mahboob Sahib had invited me home; none of the men I know in Pakistan's Punjab, even my publisher, had asked me home. Mahboob Sahib's wife had been pleasant though quiet but comes alive at the word business. Mahboob sahib had been an officer in the Pakistan Civil Services and his wife goes into a long detailed narrative of how honest he was and how difficult it was for her to run the house on his measly salary till she managed to persuade him to give up his job, start a business and make use of the contacts that he had made as a government servant to get contracts. "Just a difference of one 'r' in contacts and contracts" she smiled triumphantly and added "women have such a big responsibility to make their men see sense."

The table is lavishly laid with expensive bone china and delectable food. I continue to eat, it is after all none of my concern how Pakistani men are treated by their women. Years before Diep had visited a famine struck region in Pakistan and had been so shaken by the stark poverty that she had given up

meat and dairy products. Her plate has some potatoes from a vegetarian dish and a piece of chapatti, but Diep is concerned with the whole world. Now she lays down the morsel she had been about to put in her mouth and laughs; "It is a fool's paradise created by the men who decide when, why, how and what they have to do; they let us women think that we have been instrumental in bringing about the change. The only difference that we women can make is to transform ourselves; but we never get down to doing it." I have heard of people being persuaded to love, harassed, cajoled, bought, tempted into loving; but can one be shocked into falling in love? If it is a possibility I am in love with Saeeda Diep! Even at the risk of being called a lesbian I just have to say that Diep is the person every woman should hope to be.

Just as we are leaving Mahboob Sahib's daughter comes down. She is preparing for the Pakistan services examination and has the telltale dark circles and harrowed expression of an over-worked examinee. She is also the star in her mother's eye who immediately gives all her attention to the young girl. Why is it alright for a woman to be a civil servant and earn much less than a businessman? Maybe Pakistan is moving in the direction of the Scandinavian countries where women have a 50% presence in parliament and in administration without any reservation. Women there are slowly and steadily taking over the job of running the country while men make the money; the age-old system of men being the procurer while women managed its disbursement; the advent of patriarchy! Is that why capitalism is surely and certainly gaining ground because economics and social functioning both cannot be handed over to women?

I am quite at sea and replicate Diep as she embraces the girl and tells her to be a good, honest officer.

Rauf chacha comes next afternoon and we talk about his new book, his autobiography that he has named 'Surkh Siyasat.' Diep lives alone so the house is uncluttered, spacious and anyone sits anywhere. We talk while Diep cooks. Guests begin to arrive as Rauf chacha is leaving; he stops to talk with some of them and then leaves hurriedly, his wife is unwell and gets lonely as the day draws to a close. Neelam Basheer Ahmed is her usual chirpy self, making everyone feel at home. It is difficult to believe that she is a strong and very brave woman who is continuously writing against Hudood laws that came into force to restrict women and curtail whatever rights they had. And then arrives Zubair Ahmed and his wife Zakia; both are educationists, Zubair teaches English and is passionate about Punjabi classical poetry. Zakia has made 'gajrela', grated carrot in milk cooked over slow heat for hours. Last time I had nicknamed Zubair 'Chaudhary Sahib'; with his fair complexion, bushy mustaches and broad shoulders he fits the conventional description of a Punjabi, Rajput or Haryanvi landowner. He waits a while and then reminds me of the 'nick-name.' We laugh at his desire to be teased with his wife joining in to make fun of him. Neelam promises to always call him 'Chaudhary' he blushes and says "but that is not the same as Noor calling me Chaudhary." We laugh some more that he wishes to be teased by an Indian woman; there is so much laughter and noise that anyone outside would take this for a school friends having a stayover.

We have begun eating when this gentleman walks in. He seems vaguely familiar and introduces himself as having attended the Sajjad Zaheer Centenary Conference. He then turns to Diep "I heard there is a party so I invited myself." Asians never turn away anyone from their table but Diep is positively put out by this gate crashing. Between dinner and dessert is an hour for stories and I had been looking forward to listening to Zubair and Neelam. Before we have barely settled down this fellow brings out his mobile

phone, announces that he is going to recite a poem and begins. This is a prose poem that goes on and on as all of us wait to make head or tail of it; no one understands that the poem has ended and there is no applause; the poet smirks and remarks "What! None of you understand it." Zubair loudly abuses him. This is a bonus one has in Punjabi company; one is treated to choicest abuses without anger or resentment; Zakia wants to know how long it took him to write it and we are informed that it is not his poem at all. The other guests are incensed and this fellow senses the annoyance and gives an introduction of how important this poet is because he stands against progressive writing; as if I am the one who should be defending the fast vanishing bastion everyone turns to me. I shrug, look at Neelam and say "I wish the opposition produced worthwhile literature like Neelam's story that we shall hear now"

"Neelam and anyone else can wait; we can hear them anytime. I am here to discuss how and why the Left has failed." He then embarks on a long soliloquy attacking one and all: people who are working for peace, for disarmament, for environment, for women, for poor. He makes fun of Diep and her work and predicts that she would either be killed by a trigger happy terrorist or by a mob. Diep laughs and says she is prepared for that while he insists that being so aggressive is not the way and she must change her attitude. Zakia gets an opportunity and jumps in suddenly "Let us first change the bitterness on our tastebuds. Come have dessert." Everyone gets up relieved while this fellow heaves himself out of the chair and announces "there is nothing sweet in my life so I do not eat dessert. Why should one wish to die when one can live? And I have to attend another party."

"Are you invited or are you gatecrashing?"

"Oh, it is the same for me because everyone wants me!" is the brazen answer he gives to Zubair's query and is out.

No one seems to know how to reignite the warmth and Neelam is the first one to leave. I long to sit Diep down and talk to her but she suddenly looks so drained and exhausted that I cannot bring myself to ask her to stop packing away everything into the refrigerator and listen to me. A hurried goodnight and I begin the climb up the stairs.

This is the first time that I find her waiting for me; she has been waiting for so long that she has fallen asleep. I curse myself for spending time at the party when I could have been here talking, but I also do not wish to wake her. I cover her with the double blanket and snuggle in beside her. She murmurs in her sleep turns sideways and her big eyes open and stare at me before closing and opening again. 'I thought you were part of a dream.'

"I think you look very beautiful when you are asleep."

"Everyone looks beautiful when asleep because it is a blissful state, part death, part travel and a lack of awareness, with no conscious compulsion to take sides and speak up."

I have a distinct feeling that she is upset about something, but I have no time to indulge her; there is so much that I have to ask, that she must tell.

“Must! You still think that anyone can compel me?”

“No! But you have come and I ----”

“You remember I had said that you shall have to prove whether you are capable of looking at the true face of life?” I nod and she sighs “it is with very high hopes that I wait to raise the curtains that time has downed on its sparkling face. How I yearn to lay bare the secrets! No thirst can match the craving I have to see life dancing, enriched and celebrating. So painful to step back, lower the flame and put a lid to snuff it out. Your wait is over and so is my expectation and as my hope dies so does my existence.”

Her face had the expression of someone longing for light, pours a few drops of oil in an earthen lamp and finds it cracked; the oil leaks out and is absorbed by the earth. But I cannot let her go.

“Look, I have a right to know----”

“Right! You still talk of your right, you who could not speak up at the KLF and tell that fellow that he was lying! He was trying to cut you off from your past. And what about just now, when this fellow was speaking about the splinter groups of the Left; making fun of the people who in small town, villages and neighborhoods are holding up the flag of struggle, who are fighting for justice and equality. This fellow threw their struggle down the drain.”

“I thought Deip would-----”

“Do you realize how much you hurt Deip who was expecting you to stand up for her cause, to support and give her fight a legitimacy. So many people missing, so many people killed, unknown martyrs on the road to integrity; they who are trying to organize and strengthening the workers, opting for personal insecurity, giving up jobs, inheritance and comfort; you negated all of them. Why? I thought you understood why there is one word in Urdu and Hindi for yesterday and tomorrow. There is a deep philosophy behind this, it dares to hold time stationary and removes the disparity between the past and the future so that the present can be understood. It is true that we live in the present but not cut off from the past nor unaware of the future. They wish to remove the past, so the present generation can be shallow and without roots. Should you not have stood up to them? To tell you the truth you are a coward, people like you are not capable of giving a new turn to life; you shall be swept away by a light breeze.”

“I had so much hope when I started out alone; but I had come a full circle. My life is a packet of shredded notes.”

“Everyone’s life is a packet of shredded notes; there is no knowing if this is a trash of bigger denomination or smaller notes. Some manage to find use of it in the form of sachets given away at the end of a meaningful journey; packets that give some joy, cause a bit of wonder, carry a moment of history, create a rethink. One tries to make a change, if only to keep hope alive that change is a possibility; there is no superior movement or meaningful effort, everything eventually turns to shreds, but struggle is a necessity. If one continues to only remain static, if one does not stand up for ones cause then one is like a note from demonetization era: new, crisp, whole and useless!

This time she did not vanish. Getting up purposefully she walked with measured steps across the balcony, then down the stairs and appeared at the gate; opening it she walked out and was visible moving to the end of the lane, till I shut my eyes tight and forced her to go away.

The taxi has left the border and is running through the mustard field. In these few days the weather has lost its harsh, severe bite and on both sides of the road the fields were full of yellow mustard blooms. The spring is on its way. Across the border mustard must be in bloom, the fields as beautiful and inviting. When the western winds wrongly called 'western disturbances' by the scientists will blow the mustard would dance with joy and say "Listen O wind, when you return in the form of the eastern winds, then do pass through the mustard fields on that side, so that we know of the wellbeing of our comrades there. Tell them that the struggle for life continues here and that we send good wishes for the struggles continuing across the border. Go laden with the fragrance of the earth and come back bathed in the bouquet of the soil there and so reinforce the confidence that this earth is one, its soil is one and the humankind living on it is one!"

[illegible]