

3.3.6 Journey to Karachi; Voyage to England

I am not 100% sure, but I think I must have stayed in Karachi with a distant uncle, Mr Muzaffar (son of my Father's step-aunt(?) Hussaina Bibi – and brother of Brigadier (then captain) Shafi, the husband of my Father's step-sister, aunty Mumtaz). In those days, you simply did not stay in hotels.

To Karachi I travelled by train (which took 35 hours to cover 850 miles) – probably by 2nd class (there used to be 4 classes those days: I (with or without air-conditioning); II; Intermediate; and III). It was a tremendously hot journey – and through the Sind desert, we were covered with several layers of dust – making one look like a jinn when you emerged in Karachi.

(i) Uncle Nisar's luggage

Since I was to travel by a first-class ship from Karachi – which had a generous allowance of a fair number of cubic feet for one's luggage it was possible to take almost a ton of luggage. Here comes in my uncle Nisar – my mother's second younger brother. He had then recently been appointed to the Pakistan Embassy in Cairo (he was under Pakistan's Ministry of Information). He was my favourite maternal uncle (*Mamun-Mamoon*) – a person very interested in Persian literature (he had done an M.A. in Persian from Lahore – GCL or Oriental College – besides an LL.B. – though he had little interest in Law'; I still have his Persian dictionary – *Ghias-ul-Lughat* – which he gave me when I was 13). He always encouraged me in my literary pursuits. I read up most of the Urdu and Persian books in the library bequeathed by his father – my *Nana*, Haji Muhammad Khan – who had died young (aged 38) in the world-wide influenza – the Spanish' flu – at the end of World War I, on 31st October 1918. He had been educated at the famous Aligadh Muslim University and had published some extremely perceptive critical essays – including a critique of Iqbal's command of *Urdu idiom*, (1903), about which I recently published a 6-instalment article in the Iqbalist magazine, *Hakeem-ul Ummat* (May – October 2007), published from Kashmir and Lucknow in India.

Anyway, *Mamoon* Nisar had the reputation of asking people to do errands for him – and his personality was such that most people were happy to oblige him. For instance, he

would write a letter to a relative X, saying: I am travelling by train from Pindi to Multan on the 25th of this month. Can you please request relative Y's wife to prepare a nice meal (nothing special: just a *pilao*, and two curries such as chicken and *kofta-aloo*, with some suitable dessert like *fireeni*) and send it through a servant to hand it to me when the train stops at Lahore at 1:15am; and then, if possible, someone should collect the used utensils at 5am when the train stops at station K. Oh, and if possible, please send a message to Brother Dost Muhammad to meet me at 11am on the 26th when the train arrives at Multan. And all this would usually be done!

So *Mamoon* Nisar wrote to my mother (his sister) in Lahore, from Cairo, saying that he gathered that Saeed was travelling from Karachi to England by boat. "That is very good – for he can then carry luggage almost without limit. It would be very kind if you asked him to bring a few things for me. When the ship stops at Suez, I could meet Saeed and bring him by train to Cairo, and then he could travel by train to Port Said to re-meet the ship. In Cairo, he can stay with me and Azra for a few hours. I'll show him the pyramids and put him into the train going to Port Said via Ismailia." And what were the items of luggage that Uncle Nisar wanted me to bring? Well, one sewing machine (Singer would be the best. "I will reimburse you!"); one or two canisters of good ghee (clarified butter); one sack of good Punjabi rice (basmati? – if it then existed); three sacks of different *dhals* (*mussoor*, *mash*, *channa*); and some odds and ends that I forget (books, crochet (embroidery) set, some home-made pickles, jams/conserves, juices – "and anything else you think might come in useful: you see, these things are not easily available here – and Azra is not an expert in these home-made condiments, etc.") Needless to say, my Mother got all these things together, as requested – and I had to lug all this tremendous juggernaut of paraphernalia with me by train from Lahore to Karachi, then by ship to Suez, and then get it all unloaded for Uncle Nisar to transport it onwards.

Uncle Nisar duly met me at Suez – coming by a pilot-boat to meet the *Caledonia*, and it was quite a job getting all that stuff loaded on to the pilot-boat which was violently bobbing up and down. Another complication was that Egypt was going through very volatile times just then. General Nguib had recently deposed King Farooq in a military coup. Also, relations between Britain and Egypt were going through a very difficult phase (there was 'sequestration' going on then, if I remember rightly, and the British army of occupation was being withdrawn). Since the *Caledonia* was a British ship, the Captain of the ship was very reluctant to put one of his passengers down at Suez – the ship itself making a slow progress through the Suez canal, taking some 16-18 hours – and then picking him up again at the other end of the Canal at Port Said. I explained that I was a Pakistani National, whose country had perfectly friendly relations with Egypt – and that my Uncle, who was to pick me up at Port Suez, was a diplomat. So the captain reluctantly allowed me to disembark – but I

had to sign a legally binding document that if I came to any harm while in Egypt, or if I failed to rejoin the ship when it arrived at Port Said, the captain would bear no responsibility whatever for any harm that came to me and would be free to sail on without me. I signed the document and accepted all responsibility for my safety or otherwise. And all this so that Uncle Nisar could receive all that ghee and the dhals, etc. (I doubt whether I would do that today!)

I have some memory as if I rejoined the ship at Ismailia – up to where Uncle Nisar had accompanied me on the train; and that then the ship squeezed its way through the narrow canal at a snail's pace to exit at Port Said. I also remember seeing the pyramids with Uncle Nasir and Auntie Azra (who was then expecting her second child, I think) – and still have some pictures of my camel ride by the pyramids, with young Auntie Azra also sitting astride the camel. The whole adventure went off smoothly, and I rejoined the ship on time, without mishap.

(ii) Activities on board the Caledonia

In 1953, travel by air was not very common. (My first aeroplane journey was in December 1956, from Cambridge (by train) to London, London to Karachi (by air), Karachi to Lahore (by train).) Most people went abroad by ship. I boarded the (all-First Class) ship, Caledonia, operated by a Scottish (?) company, Anchor Line, at Karachi on 16th September 1953 – embarking upon a 19-day voyage, ending at Liverpool on 5th October 1953. The journey was a great – and a most enjoyable – experience. I made some friends, with whom I am still in touch after 55 years! The ship had started from Bombay – so it also had on board some Indian passengers. There was also a large contingent of English (and Scottish?) men and women – perhaps 25%. The Captain was English/Scottish, as were the ship's Bursar, stewards, doctor, etc. The serving staff were mostly Indian/Pakistani/Sri Lankan(?) – as were most of the deck hands, etc.

For the first 2 or 3 days most of the Indo-Pakistani passengers were very sea-sick – and we couldn't face eating any meals. But after that, we ate with great gusto. Not only was all the food free – but you could order any amount of it: and you could order both Indian and English dishes simultaneously. A few of us Indian and Pakistani students, professional trainees, etc., formed a clique, and we always sat together at the table – and usually ordered a disgracefully large number of both Indian and English dishes, many of which we hardly touched (just tasting them for experience). This clique included, besides myself: Mr Khusrow Ali Baig (from Hyderabad Deccan, who – by great coincidence – was also going to my college (Gonville and Caius) in Cambridge); a young insurance company (Norwich Union) trainee, called Mukhtar Ahmed, I think; a tailoring trainee from Rawal Pindi, Aman Ullah – who was to train as a cutter with Burberry and Co. of Piccadilly or Regents Street, London. Other, a

little senior, friends that I made during that voyage (though they did not always sit at our juvenile table at mealtime) included the following: Dr Ahmad Hasan Dani (a former student of the great archaeologist, Colonel Mortimer Wheeler) – who later became the doyen of Pakistani archaeology (whom we last saw, with Nadia our daughter, in Islamabad in March 2006, when he was beginning to suffer from dementia at the age of 88; P.S. he died in ~2009). Dr Khurshid-ul-Islam, a remarkable scholar, who later became a Professor and Head of Department of Urdu at the Aligadh Muslim University in India and shone as a glittering poet, prose-writer and critic. He was coming to England to work with the legendary scholar of Urdu, Mr Ralph Russell (who died about 4 weeks ago on 20th September 2008, aged 92. He once stayed in our home in Birmingham – when I invited him to speak on Ghalib, in my capacity as the President of the Society for the Advancement of Urdu, Birmingham (انجمن ترقی اردو، برمنگھم) in February 1983. Dr Khurshid-ul-Islam later published translations of Ghalib jointly with Russell. I saw Dr Islam in Aligadh (1979) and in Oxford (1988); he died in 2005. And then there was Dr Rifat Hussain Usmani and his stunningly beautiful bride, Moti (= ‘Pearl’) Usmani. RHU was a research-chemist, who was coming to work with Glaxo (he was later the Head of Glaxo Laboratories in Karachi – or at least head of a division). Moti Begum was one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen – slender, tall, in billowing Saris fluttering in the wind on the ship’s deck. Rifat Usmani was (actually, both of them are still alive and living in Karachi and we saw them both last in Karachi in January/February 2001) the younger brother of the brilliant future Chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission – and my future boss, who appointed me the Director of the Atomic Energy Centre, Lahore, 1963-1965 – Dr I. H. (Ishrat Hussain) Usmani (who died in 1992).

I was talking above about our eating extravaganzas on board the Caledonian. Khusrow and I and Mukhtar and Aman used to order *parathas*, and *chapattis*, and *pilow*, and several curries (North Indian, South Indian, Bengali, Punjabi, Ceylonese), and English steaks, and roast potatoes, and ice-creams and Indian/Pakistani sweets such as *rass malais*, *rass gullas* and *gulab jamans*. As I said above, many of the dishes we hardly touched. (I remember Khusrow Ali Baig cautioning me emphatically not to touch the English mustard – as it would sting my tongue. It was years before I found that mustard was a much tamer condiment. Needless to say that we ate literal amounts of hot Indian pickles without batting an eye lid.)

A few other memories of that cruise.

We used to walk around the decks for daily exercise/constitutional – surrounded by an infinity of water. I still remember a stunning sunset on the sea. It looked for all the world like a huge boat on fire – with red flames leaping from all over it. It took a few moments to realize that it was actually the sun going down the horizon. The image remained afloat for a

while before the 'boat' fully sunk. Then we used to sit in deck chairs, chatting for hours with friends. There were a few games organized by the ship's Captain to keep his passengers amused. One I remember were sweepstakes to guess what distance the ship would travel over the next 24 hours. The correct answer came up as 389 nautical miles if I remember rightly.

One other event was a fancy dress ball. Now we had no idea that it was to be a formal ball – when people actually danced on a dance floor. It was the first time I or my friends had been amongst so many Europeans. Now, before we had set sail for Karachi, one of my friends, Salahuddin – who did his MSc Physics with me, but was something of a sports person – had asked me to do him a favour. An uncle of his, he said, was getting married in Germany. Could I take a white silk-saree for the bride-to-be, and post it from England? I had gladly agreed to do so. Secondly, a day or so earlier we had sailed past Port Sudan – where we had ridden glass-bottomed tourist boats, through which one could see the magical vistas of red coral reefs. I had bought a large number of corals, large sea-shells (mother of pearl, etc.) – and other souvenirs, which remained with me for the next 30-40 years, until Inge threw them away. Somewhere, I or my friends had also acquired some brass anklet bells (Karachi? Aden? Port Sudan – where we had disembarked for a few hours; the temperature had been like in an inferno – perhaps 50-55 degrees C, I still remember.) Anyway, I thought I had an enviable amount of exotica to help me take part in a fancy dress ball. I asked my new friend Khusrow Baig to join me in our act.

So, while the ball was in full swing, Khusrow and I jumped on to the dance floor like two uncouth fawn. I had draped the above-mentioned saree over my shoulders and around my torso, to look like an Indian fakir (mendicant). I had literally sprinkled talcum powder on my hair, to make me look old. I was carrying a large sea-shell in my hand, meant to be a begging bowl – in which I had also put some Indian sweet meats (burfis, jalebis) from the lunch-time fare. On my ankles were strapped the tinkle-bells. Khusrow had some similar garb. So on we jumped into the middle of the dance floor – and started gyrating in a wild frenzy. The English men and women – at first startled - soon fell in with the *tamasha* (spectacle) going on in their midst. They vacated the middle of the dance-floor and stood on the edges, forming a large circle and started clapping and laughing and shouting encouragement. I went close to them with my begging bowl – expecting that they might put some rupees or pennies into it. But most of them thought I was offering them the sweets to eat – and many of the ladies picked up the *burfis* etc. and thanked me for my kindness.

After a quarter of an hour of this most incongruous (and as I now think, completely ridiculous) tempestuosity, Khusrow and I went off the stage, bowing profusely as a gesture of thanks, amidst peals of laughter and applause from all present – who could now go back to resume their ball-room dancing. I have no idea what they thought of these two young, naïve

and impetuous *bhangra*-makers; but that, Khusrow and I thought at the time, was what was meant by a fancy-dress ball... Fools rush in, where angels fear to tread...!

There is a postscript to this episode. Years later – in 1964, when Dr I H Usmani sent me to Peshawar University to determine whether the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission should donate some equipment to their Physics Department that they had requested – I (and I think Inge) spent a few days at that University. Besides meeting my old Cambridge University friend, Hassan Asghar Kazmi – who taught Chemistry there – one evening we met (at my request to H A Kazmi) the uncle of my erstwhile class fellow Salah-ud-Din – who, I remembered, was a lecturer in Physical Instruction at that University, named Adil Khan. Anyway, I met the uncle and he introduced his wife to us – whom I reminded of the *saree* I had sent her. She said she still had it, and thanked me for it. Then in 1973-1974 I was spending 6 months in Islamabad as Advisor to the-then new Chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, Mr Munir Ahmed Khan. My family was with me. During that time, we made a sight-seeing trip through the state of Swat (a ‘striking place’ – according to the Duke of Edinburgh). We were looking at the interesting museum (mostly of Buddhist relics of the area) at Mingora, the capital of the state. There we came across a female European visitor. When Inge told her that she was German, the lady said, “So am I”. I joined the conversation to remark that there were not all that many Germans in Pakistan. “I only knew one German lady, whom I had met years ago” I said, “but you wouldn’t know her. She was married to a Pakistani, called Adil Khan”. “That’s me!”, she replied, to my amazement. “What a coincidence!”, I remarked.

Another few years passed. In around 1983 (or was it 1979?), I was visiting Islamabad, and staying with my uncle Siddiq, who knew the famous Urdu poet Ahmed Faraz (whom, of course, I knew very well, for he had often visited Birmingham with that other great Urdu poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, from 1976 onwards – when Faiz stayed for a few weeks at the house of our friend Badr (Beider) Sahib – and both of whom had been entertained at our home in Birmingham on several occasions). Anyway Faraz invited Uncle Siddiq and me to have dinner with him one evening. He said he was staying as a paying guest of a German lady, called Frau Mittmann. During the evening I remarked that I only knew one other German lady in Pakistan – a Mrs Adil Khan at Peshawar. “That’s me!”, she remarked to my amazement again. She introduced us to her two slim daughters. She explained that she had divorced her husband (it transpired that, on arriving in Pakistan in the late 1950’s, she had discovered that Mr Adil Khan already had a Pakistani wife; and also that he was some 12 years older than he had claimed to her to be). Anyway, she was now running a small guest-house in Islamabad in her maiden name, Karen Mittmann. (I suspect that she was also a mistress of Faraz – a notorious philanderer and womanizer, who died about 3 months ago, in July 2008). So, quite a string of coincidences! More recently, Inge and I met her several

times at the home of our calligrapher friend, Mr Rasheed Butt, in Islamabad. Frau Mittmann had by now put on a huge amount of weight and bore no resemblance to the slim woman that I had kept running into. She has recently translated the autobiography of the famous orientalist Anne-Marie Schimmel from German into (rather stilted, according to my wife) English. A-M. Schimmel had, apparently, become quite chummy to Karen Mittmann.