

India is 70, but what celebration for this family?



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Wide Angle

In the 70th year of Independence, I find myself emotionally drained handling a deeply personal story spread over India, Pakistan and the United States. I shall presently share it with you but let me first spell out the dramatic personae to simplify the story.

When the feudal order was breaking down, my family in Mustafabad near Rae Bareilly produced two ideological streams. My father came from a line of staid Congressmen. In fact his elder brother, Wasi Naqvi, was the first Congress MLA from Rae Bareilly. My earliest memory of political activity in these 70 years is of Feroz Gandhi weaving his parliamentary seat around my uncle's Assembly constituency. This was the seat that Indira Gandhi inherited, then Rajiv Gandhi and so on.

My mother's family was more literary and, after the intellectual fashion of those days, of a more leftist bent. Her only brother Saiyid Mohammad Mehdi, our dearest "Mamujan", caught the eye of P.C. Joshi, CPI's general secretary, who was then stitching together the Indian People's Theatre and Progressive Writers Association. Joshi whisked Mamujan away to Mumbai to share a commune with Sardar Jafri, Kaifi Azmi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Krishen Chander and a host of others.

Mamujan's younger daughter, Shireen, with a degree from JNU, could not ignore her mother's entreaties and married a cousin, Abbas, a gentleman to boot, settled in Dubai but, alas, of Pakistani parentage. The condition for the marriage were clear: they would live in a neutral country, not in Pakistan. Shireen obstinately held onto her Indian passport.

Like her father, Shireen is a reader (a book in two days) and taught in a school. Abbas stuck to investment banking.

Their eldest daughter Mariam studied cinema in Canada, fell in love with a Haitian filmmaker and settled in Canada. She was confident that her Indian passport, on which she had travelled to India many times, would be part of the record even if she acquired her husband's nationality.

She had goofed. She had not taken into account the dark shadow that would always hover over her head — her father's Pakistani nationality. That fact scratches out her Indianness. This is just a minor consequence of what the leaders of India, Pakistan and Britain accomplished 70 years ago. But Shireen had to prepare for worse.

When she was in the family way again, her husband had taken a transfer to the Cayman Islands. For Shireen, this was a godsend in a most unexpected way. In the ninth month of her confinement, she would cross over to Florida for greater gynaecological care. This is precisely what Shireen did. So, not only was little Rabab born in a world-class hospital, she was doubly blessed on another

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score. She was born with a priceless document: an American passport. So far so good, until God revealed his enigmatic side: Rabab was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, immobile, comprehensively challenged, condemned to move only on a wheelchair.

Shireen and Rabab were able to travel to New Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, Mustafabad once or twice a year until the collapse of the global economy in 2008 affected Shireen's mobility. Frequent travel between Dubai and Delhi became too expensive.

When sorrows come, they come in battalions. At 30, Rabab is a big, heavy girl. With tears in her eyes, her Bangladeshi nanny told Shireen that Rabab was too heavy for her to change her

clothes, bathe, seat on a wheelchair and be put to bed.

Shireen and Abbas began to share these chores until the next installment of bad news. Shireen, diagnosed with leukemia some years ago, found the disease gathering pace now.

She now faces an existential choice. Her support structure — sister, uncles, cousins, nieces are all in India. She already has an apartment next door to our daughters, her adoring nieces.

Shireen, of course, has an Indian passport and can come and go as she pleases. The problem is with Rabab's long-term visa as it's impossible to cart her back and forth, pointlessly, on a short-term visa, which incidentally is not assured either. One would have thought she can sail in with her American passport. But that is not the case. Her father's nationality trumps all other considerations. Look, she is on a wheelchair. Doesn't matter. She is comprehensively challenged. That does not qualify her for an Indian visa. The system is telling an invalid child that her father is her curse.

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The document that Mariam was handed by the Indian high commission in Ottawa (when she applied for an OCI card some years ago) takes one's breath away: "As per the MHA's OCI ruling, no person who, or either of whose parents or grandparents or great-grandparents is or has been a citizen of Pakistan, Bangladesh at any time or such other country as the Central government may, by notification in the official gazette, specify, shall be eligible for registration as an Overseas Citizen of India cardholder. In view of the existing OCI rules, you are not entitled for grant of an OCI card facility because one of your parents is of Pakistani origin." That Mariam was born in India and, before marriage, travelled extensively on an Indian passport is of no consequence.

I realise more than most people that these are abnormal times. In fact, my career as a foreign correspondent would have been impossible without unstinted help, on a personal

basis, from friends in the foreign office and in other parts of the government.

Additionally, visas for friends and relatives, on both sides of the border, were there for the asking. My friends were a strand in the vast mosaic that kept the nation's sanity. Thanks to them, visiting relatives from Pakistan envied us for the friends we had. "Bhaiyya, can we buy land here?" It all seems so distant in time.

My mother, an eternal optimist, a great favourite of Shireen and Abbas, indeed our entire universe, died three years ago, firm in her belief that sooner or later the mists will lift and peace will descend. She would recite the following couplet with wistfulness in the eyes:

"Bada maza us milap mein hai,

Jo sulah ho jaae, jung ho kar?"
(There is great pleasure in that harmony which descends after a big quarrel.)

Would my mother have been able to sustain that optimism given the state of play on this, our 70th birthday?

The writer is a senior journalist and commentator based in New Delhi