

Leaving home

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My brother, Ricky, sister, Amrit and I had only found out a week before, that we were just about to be whisked away to a foreign country we hadn't set in for seven years, and seven years before that. We would be staying there for a whole month, so as you can imagine, we were taken aback, yet somewhat sceptic, as we'd always heard our parents mentioning a trip to India for a few months, but never actually believed they would go to the bother of booking the tickets. After all, my mother had only taken my now 5-year-old sister to see her family there four years ago.

My immediate concern was language. I can read and write my mother tongue, and understand what people are telling me, but wasn't very good at speaking back. I think this pleased my parents, they thought it would be good for us, as they knew we would have to start learning to talk in our mother tongue Punjabi. It wasn't really difficult to prepare for the trip, well not for me anyway. All I had to do was make sure I had a holiday form, homework and suitcase packed. However, my poor parents had to sort out the passports, visas, currency, jabs (ouch) and house security while we were away.

I didn't really tell my friends until the last minute, as I was expecting a cancellation, change in plan or even told I'd been set up and it was all a joke. I was actually a little annoyed with my parents for not booking during school holidays, not because I'd miss school, only the workload I'd have to catch up on. But once they explained that they couldn't get a holiday the same time as us, I felt quite sorry for them. When I think back to it, I was actually disappointed that we were going to India, instead of Canada in the summer, which is where I was hoping go, which was no longer possible.

India as I last remembered it, was freezing in the morning, and boiling in the afternoon (we went in December), pretty smelly, the people were scared to talk to me and my brother (my sister wasn't born then), and we didn't really want to say anything to them. The thing that disgusted me most about this country was definitely the latrines. I tried not to go to the toilet unless I had a full bladder and was desperate; it was also hard to get toilet paper over there. This time, we prepared ourselves with plenty of rolls before we left.

I wasn't very impressed then, but it was also the reason we had gone in the first place, that we didn't feel like enjoying ourselves. It was pretty depressing, as my mother's brother had died in a tractor accident on Diwali, so my mother left England a few weeks before us to go to his funeral. I must admit that I was a little excited, as many of my relatives from Britain had gone a few weeks before us, so we would be meeting them there as well. The flight had been delayed three hours, so I didn't really have a positive attitude when we arrived at the airport.

The one thing that thrilled me when we were boarding the plane was that the passengers went on the stairs instead of the corridor, like in the movies, so that we could actually see the plane as we were boarding it. I'm not scared of flying, but I did grow a little nervous as I approached the plane, the paintwork was hand done, the panels looked loose, and generally dirty. I didn't look like it would make it all the way to India. The airhostesses also looked scary.

The were from Kyrgystan, the airline company we were travelling with, and spoke in Russian to each other and in a Russian accent to the passengers. I

had to strain to understand them properly. They wore thick bright coloured make up, and were always smiling. This had the opposite effect on me than intended, they reminded me of clowns! Inside, the plane was pretty cramped, and during the take off, my ears hurt and I felt sick. Since we were stopping in Turkey for a break, and changing planes in Russia, I had to go through this six times before we even landed in India.

On the plane journey, my family were relaxing, listening to music, and reading magazines, but I was working away, struggling to get my homework finished before we reached India, so I could feel free without the stress of having to catch up there. Although we would be so busy I wouldn't even have time. The whole journey lasted two days, the second plane was even worse. Russia is so cold, that there was ice forming inside the plane! It was brilliant when we actually landed in Delhi. The sun was out and the people at the airport were so welcoming.

After we came out through customs, we were re-united with my sister's water gun, and mother's almond hair oil, which had been confiscated in Birmingham. I had to laugh. Then we came across a big problem. One of our suitcases was missing. It contained all of my Ricky's clothing. We could claim the contents on insurance, but had to take him shopping for new clothes as soon as possible. I was thirsty, and wanted a drink, but there was one thing that stood in my way, no rupees. While my parents sorted out the lost property forms, I sneaked over to one of the currency exchange bureaus and decided to test the Indian in the office.

I got out one pound and put it on the desk. He said, " is that all? " grinning. I replied, " it's all I've got. " Then he said, " well only for you then! " I got my sixty-five rupees, and went straight to get a coffee. My mother and I went to the arrivals lounge, where we met my uncle. They were hugging each other, and they all started chatting in Punjabi. The poor man had been waiting for ages, as he hadn't known about the delay, so I went to get the rest of my family. I whispered to my mum " Mum, he looks nothing like you. " Then she told that he was her cousin, not her brother.

We somehow managed to pack everything into the Sumo, which is like a type of jeep or taxi. I was squashed in the back, it was very uncomfortable, but I concentrated on everything around me. There were loads of children coming back from school in their mopeds. Apparently, the timing for our trip had been brilliant for the weather, but our cousins would be taking their exams at this time. In India, the children have to take an exam at the end of every school year; the result of this exam determines whether they will be allowed into the next class. If they fail, they will have to repeat the year.

I felt a bit like an intruder when I heard this, because they would have vital work to do, and I would be expecting them to show me around or getting bored. We arrived at the village we would be staying at, Gureh in Ludhiana, Punjab for the next week at around about midnight. I was surprised; could say shocked at the state of the house. The standard was better than the housing in England. The layout is not quite the same, but there was a toilet, a decant shower area, separate bedrooms, and they even had a car. I met my aunt, and my cousin Manjit, who's eighteen years old.

He seemed quite shy, and always walked with his head down. His sister who is my age was already gone to sleep. We dumped our bags in our room, and after about an hour, went to sleep. The next day, we got up late and relaxed the whole day. When I met Pardeep, I remembered her from seven years ago straight away. She was pretty cheeky, and sometimes a bit spoilt, but she showed me around the village. I felt ever so conscious of my clothes. I was wearing trousers and a top, but everybody else, in their salwar kameez (type of Indian suit) just smiled.

For the next the day of two, we visited relatives from villages that lived near Ludhiana. My uncle drove us. I felt a bit rude, as I didn't remember many of them. One day that week, we took the car ourselves, and I was told I was going to go to Mussayala. This village I could not forget. Last time Ricky and I had great fun chasing after the chickens, feeding the cows the chapattis we refused to eat, running around with our uncles and aunts. They're actually our age, but it's one of the funny age differences that happen a lot in our family tree.

At this village lived my great granddad, which gave me something to talk about at home. The only way I can think of to describe Mussayala is that it is one of those ancient forgotten old places in the middle of nowhere. The village had a single toilet, which was sometimes pretty embarrassing. As I thought about how many times we had watched the home video we made from last time, I grew more exited. But when we arrived, in the evening, my "cousins" acted as if they couldn't figure out who we were. Okay, so maybe my Punjabi wasn't great, but they were so shy. I hoped that this would not carry on.

Because my parents had arranged to see an architect about the building on the plot of land for my grandmother. The only architects we knew of were in Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab. I didn't really have any expectations of the city at first, but was very impressed. We got there on the bus, which isn't the best way of travelling in India. We were out in the town, and got to travel in the rickshaws. The roads were a lot cleaner than those in the villages. It was practically like England. We went to an actual fast food restaurant, but it didn't sell meat so we just ordered chips and pizza.

I wasn't anticipating there would be so many young college students, who wore the same sort of trousers and top I did. I immediately regretted my decision to wear a traditional suit that day. This was the one time I would have felt comfortable in my normal English clothes, and I'd just wasted that chance. The architects had a proper office, and were very professional, not just some back room of a shop, and didn't take long to find. It wasn't a very long meeting, as my parents didn't have enough information about the plot to make a plan.

The data had to be really detailed, such as which direction the sun rises. I didn't realise that little things like this affected the construction of a house. We wandered around the centre of the town for a while, and the things I saw made me sure I would have felt comfortable staying here for a few days. But the problem of having too many things to do and too little time to do it in always got in the way. The city is really quite modern and developed; in fact, the whole of the country has really progressed in the last seven years.

The shantytowns still lie on the outskirts of the towns, but technology is more advanced and the nation has noticeably prospered. Some people in the farm villages were even walking around with mobile phones. I think that which area of India you see that affects the overall impression. If you compared somewhere like Mussayala to Gureh, you can really see the change. The original plan had been to spend one week in Punjab, two weeks in U. P. where my mum's family lived, and go to somewhere like Goa or Bangalore for the remaining week, before heading back towards Delhi.

Since we had spent so long in Punjab because of this plot business, this was no longer possible. My dad said that it was silly that we thought we could get everything done in only a month. I was delighted that my cousin Pardeep had holidays and could come to U. P. with us. We really couldn't afford to be lazy the day we were leaving, we got ready early that day, but were still delayed, as the Sumo we had hired had to go back and get a roof rack for all of our luggage. My mum gave the servants some money, and we left with everybody waving goodbye. I was very grateful for their hospitality.

This trip took the whole day. Me, Pardeep, Ricky and Amrit sat at the back, parents in the middle and drivers at the front. I just read a magazine, my brother and sister played, and my cousin listened to the Walkman. We stopped off at a few of what would be the equivalent to cafes a few times, bought a supply of crisps and some drink, and went to the latrines while we had the chance. On the route to U. P. , we had to go through a beautiful rural state called Haryana. This is the sort of place where you meet village maids milking cows, there was green grass everywhere and the landscape was beautiful.

I had never seen anywhere like it, not even in the Hindi films. On the map, the state was just a small chunk of land. As we came nearer to the heart of U. P. (my mum's family lived south of UP) we saw many women wearing cloths over their heads, there were many more Muslims living here. I also noticed that the signs were written in Hindi. It was annoying, because I couldn't understand what they said, and felt quite ignorant. In Punjab, the main language was Punjabi. Even when the people here spoke Punjabi, they did with a Hindi accent which was difficult to understand fully.

I didn't realise that such a change could happen only across states. As it grew dark, we were just approaching the town nearest to my mum's village, Kashipur. We stopped here to buy some bottles of coke. It was here that I began to get excited, we were so near. Pardeep kept telling us how far we were. My mum had already warned me, that most of my cousins my age, would be at their boarding schools, but the younger ones would be here. I was a bit worried, but also enthusiastic. We were all half asleep when we arrived. As we approached the house, I saw a huge a mass of people waiting to welcome us.

I never realised I had such a big family. We got out, and everyone was hugging everybody else. It felt good, even if you didn't know who was who. My mum began telling how I was related to everyone else which sometimes got a bit confusing. My older cousins were joking, telling me how they were planning to marry me off some overweight drunk from India. They were also joking about my brother, because he doesn't speak much Punjabi. " He wouldn't know if we were swearing at him though, would he? He'd just ignore it. " This made me laugh.

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During the next week, some of cousins came from boarding school for a bit, but there was only one day where everyone was there together, and that was on Ricky's birthday that was celebrated with a couple of party poppers. In the middle of the last week, me and my family, Pardeep, my mum's brother and his son, Jatinder, my mum's sister's daughter, Kuldeep, and my mum's late brother's daughter, Amandeep, who is a bit bratty went on a day trip to Nainital, a village on the foothills of the Himalayas. This is the place my parents visited when they first bought Ricky and me to India.

My brother and I of course couldn't remember the place at all, and didn't understand why they were so keen to go back there again. But when we actually got there, we soon found out. We were all crammed into the back of a jeep, and arrived in two and a half hours. During which Jatinder, who was sitting opposite me, flicked nuts at me, tapped me continually and succeeded in annoying me, although he is a year older. Nainital was BRILLIANT. It reminded me of Nepal. The people looked Nepalese and spoke in a Nepalese accent. We even dressed in Nepalese costume and took photos.

We went on a few rides, and rode on some horses up the mountains. The view on the ski lift was spectacular, and the scenery of the Himalayas was amazing. Me, Ricky, Jatinder and Pardeep went to on a paddleboat on a large lake for an hour or so. This was tiring, yet relaxing at the same time. It was shortly after this, that we left to go back to UP. I was disappointed when we returned to Delhi for our last night. I didn't miss England at all, not even the tele. There were tears as we left the village. I felt sick at the bottom of my stomach when we waved goodbye.

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I'd got a little gift for each of my cousins, and made my uncle promise he'd make sure they got them. " See you in four months" I said to him, as we dragged our entire luggage to the x-rays. I knew there wasn't much chance of my parents letting me come back in the summer holidays, even though I told them I was willing to go alone. Apparently, it was so hot, that I wouldn't be able to survive, and would get ill quickly. When Kuldeep asked me when I was coming back, I jokingly told her on her wedding day, though she is only seventeen, but I was surprised when she made keep it as a promise to her.

I had picked up many skills throughout the holiday. These include: milking a cow, driving a tractor, making ghee, and insulting somebody in Punjabi, many of which are pretty useless to me in Britain, but it was the experience of learning these things from my relatives that I treasure. When the plane landed in Britain, I don't think I've ever felt so down. I still want to turn around and go straight back. The weather suited my mood perfectly, it was pouring down. My friends at school and family said there were three things that had changed about me.

My skin colour was darker, or as my friend Shona said, " glowing". (This sounded much nicer.) I had also lost a bit of weight, which I have unfortunately regained. I think the change that most people especially my relatives noticed was, that I spoke much nicer Punjabi, and my words flowed better. I think this is because, in England, I could get away with thinking in English, translating the words into the other language, and then letting them out. Whereas in India, you must think sharply and reply quickly, so I had to train my mind to think, as well as speak in Punjabi, which is why it has improved so much.