

# Taken for a METRØ RIDE

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TreeShade Books

*Nina*

*Tuesday, 4 April*

I am going to be frank here. The moment I read the mail sent by my cousin Aliya, from the US of A (as she keeps saying), I wasn't sure whether to be happy or worried.

Aliya had left India when she was about 11 years old. Her parents had decided they wanted to move to 'greener pastures' for the sake of their kids.

"America is where the future is, Bhai," said Naresh, Aliya's father who was also my Dad's elder brother.

'That is where the opportunities are,' he reiterated, almost as if he had to convince himself and my Dad about moving abroad.

"If you have decided to go, I am sure it must be for the best," my Dad said quietly, putting an end to all the discussions.

The interesting thing was that even though Naresh Tauji was the older of the two, it was Dad who called the shots in their relationship.

As a teenager, I had been old enough to remember every bit of their conversation.

At one level, I had been slightly envious that Aliya would be living abroad, in a land that was seen as the "land of arrival" especially way back then, when immigrations to the US were not that many or frequent.

But on the other hand, I was relieved at not being uprooted to a strange place, and having to find roots there, settling in with people who were from a different country, continent and race.

It was, however, a huge relief to see that Naresh Tauji's family had been excited. Somehow that took the edge off the whole transition process and we were all sucked into the excitement.

Initially, post their relocation, Aliya had been in touch with us. Her parents would call up once in a while and the whole family would take turns and talk with them.

"How's the weather? Place? How are you all?" - was what we would talk about, but somehow the fact that we could connect across the continents and seven seas still seemed unbelievable.

Naresh Tauji and his family would visit once every two or three years and it was something we all really looked forward to.

Everything – right from the gifts they brought, their stories, changing accents and lifestyle - added to the excitement. They would arrive with toilet paper, hand-wash, shampoos, creams and perfumed body lotions. In a whiff, it was as if Uncle Sam had enveloped our house.

As was common with 'people visiting from abroad', their trip was packed with a hectic schedule. There was a proper itinerary in place - encompassing a list of people to meet, places to see and things to buy from India.

It was during these shopping expeditions that Aliya and I got to spend some time together. I knew exactly where to take her for buying the items on her shopping list - junk jewellery, kurtas, sequined juttis and what we called JNU jholas.

"I just love these things. They serve a double purpose for me," she said with a slight twirl of the R's now.

“One, these remind me of India constantly and I feel connected, and secondly, with these, I also stand out in a crowd and get a lot of attention,” she winked.

I couldn’t help but laugh. She was almost in her teens and not surprisingly, happy at the attention.

But with time, everyone got really busy and work and studies took their toll. Their visits started getting infrequent. With Skype and calling cards we managed to stay in touch constantly, but those didn’t suffice.

Without our even realising it, Aliya and I lost our close connection, since conversations that went like “hi, how have you been?... Me good, and you?” could not be called as a connecting link.

While her parents did come to India over the years, Aliya could not make it because of studies and exams - first at school and then at the university.

After all these years, the news that she was planning to come to Delhi for some research on underprivileged kids in South Asia for her Ph.D seemed almost unbelievable.

“Ph.D? Aliya? She could barely clear her 8th class exam here!” my mother had remarked when she heard the news.

“She said that she would be here for four months and has asked if she could stay here with us,” I informed.

“She has indeed become an American. Since when do people in our country ask family members if they can stay with them?” my Dad asked.

“Dad, it may just be formality, but still she needs to ask,” I added.

“Tell her, of course it is okay. I will give Naresh a piece of my mind when I speak to him next. So much formality!” he said, resuming his dinner.

I replied to Aliya and told her that she was welcome to stay with us for as long as she wanted.

That night, I wondered how it would be like to meet her after so long. I speculated about how much she has changed – not just in appearance but also in her behaviour and general disposition.

Whatever it was, we will get to see soon, I told myself as I drifted into sleep.

***Nina***

***Sunday, 9 April***

“Hi Nina,” I could hear her shout even before I could see her.

Hmn, some things hadn’t changed. She was still as loud and chirpy as she was when I last met her.

“You look just the same,” she said, as we hugged each other.

“And you look nothing like what I saw last time. My god, you have grown so tall,” I couldn’t help saying.

“And fat too. Go on, say it. I don’t mind. I am a total foodie and can’t help eating the amazing food. Cheese, pizzas, sundaes and chocolates. Yummy!” she made a slurping sound.

“Ha ha. We will get your palate ‘Indianised’ in no time with *aloo tikki, golgappas and chaat*,” I said as we headed to the car.

“Oh my god! I can’t wait,” she squealed.

***Nina***

***Wednesday, 12 April***

Since Aliya had too much to cover in her schedule, we sat down after breakfast to work out her schedule for the duration of her stay.

“I will need to visit several places during my visit. I have a list of all the organisations lined up and the area where they are based,” she said, spreading a sheet of paper before us, right after clearing the dining table.

“That is a long list. It’s almost like you have all the corners of Delhi covered,” said my Dad, looking at the paper, as he got up, full of curiosity, from the sofa, where he had settled to watch the television after breakfast.

“I didn’t really plan it that way, but these institutions would be useful for my research. But the thing that is bothering me is how do I get to all these places! Maa and Pa were quite concerned about my stay in Delhi. They said buses were a total no-no, since DTC buses are notorious and the crowds are quite rowdy. They are okay if I take an auto to these places, but have instructed me to ask for your help in finding out what it would cost. According to my parents, the auto guys only know how to fleece the passengers, especially in my case, if they come to know I am from the US...” she went on and on.

“What have your parents been telling you about India?” my Dad was now piqued.

“When was the last time he was here? Does he not know that we have a very active and efficient metro service in the city now?”

Mum and I exchanged quick glances. Naresh Tauji had indeed touched Dad's raw nerve – his patriotism.

“India has been making progress by leaps and bounds, mind you. Naresh just reads the western perspective about India and feeds that to you. Madam, you don't need to take any bus or an auto. You can use the metro to reach 90 per cent of these places now,” my Dad continued proudly.

I felt like saying – “Hear hear, Mr Modi. You will find no other ambassador of India's development and growth than my Dad who refuses to hang up his India-cap, every time someone comes from abroad.”

“Don't worry about it beta. You can go with Nina tomorrow and get your metro card made. Get a metro map as well, so that you know which to board when you need to go somewhere,” Mum said.

“That's awesome! I am so excited. Nina, let's go first thing in the morning tomorrow,” she said, as we got up and joined Dad to watch some television, before Aliya's jet lag set in.



***Nina***

***Thursday, 13 April***

We left by 8.30 in the morning - not because Aliya had to reach on time, but my Dad couldn't wait to show his niece the "proof" of India's modern infrastructure.

He was not the only one obsessed and fascinated with the metros. Ever since the metro master plan got the green signal, everyone from house owners to tenants and office goers had been swearing that they were in the vicinity of the "metro." The word "metropolitan" seemed to have a whole new meaning.

Soon, even property dealers started their sales pitch with the phrase - "the house faces the metro station...it's just a few minutes' walk from the station..."

Not just property dealers, even friends who shifted/bought houses, relatives who moved somewhere, and even acquaintances who set up offices - each one of them had a single line that sealed the deal - "it is right next to the metro station."

I wondered whatever happened to the good old "park-facing" houses???

"So how are we going to the metro station?" Aliya asked.

"We are going to take an e-rickshaw," I told her.

And as soon as I said it, there it was - right in front of us.

"Metro station," I said.

He nodded and we got onto it.

“This is so coooooool,” Aliya drooled. She was clearly enjoying every moment of her open e-rickshaw ride.

When I handed him a 20 rupee note after getting off, Aliya stared at me.

“This is really cheap, isn’t it?” she almost whispered, as if the driver would change his mind and charge her more if he heard her.

As we got into the station and walked towards the escalator, Aliya was looking around at her surroundings, with wonder. She remarked that the station was much neater and smarter than she had expected.

“It is also quite well-lit,” she exclaimed. We were now in front of the concourse, with ticketing counters and the vendor stalls.

“Not bad. These kiosks seem so tempting,” she said, taking in the small eatery stalls offering snacks and sweets and soft drinks. There were some other kiosks as well, where one could buy cosmetics, gift items, books and chocolates etc.

She seemed quite a foodie and I was aware that the way to her heart was indeed through her stomach!!!

At the ticket counter, I got a metro card made for her and showed her how to top it up as and when required.

“Let’s do one thing. Let us take a ride till Barakhamba Metro Station, where my office is, and then we can come back. It will give you an idea of how to go about next week,” I said.

“Oh yes. That is a good idea,” she said.

We got into the metro, which unfortunately was crowded and so we didn't get a place to sit. Thankfully, Barakhamba Road station was only a few stations away.

During our short ride, Aliya told me about her project, the topic for her dissertation and future plans.

With our past connection back in place, I realized it was going to be fun travelling with her - as and when - because she had so much to share. It amused me to see that she had an opinion on almost everything she saw and heard.

"Oh stations here have more advertisements rather than murals. Murals are more common in the US," she said.

So she was also quite observant, I couldn't help noticing.

"Also people here are really talkative. They seem to be either talking on the phone or to one another. In the US, people are usually glued to their phones, watching something or listening to something," she said.

"Well, Indians in general are talkative, as you will find out yourself in days to come," I said and she laughed.

"I am sure of that. That's what Maa and Pa have been telling me all this while. Actually, I can't wait to start with this whole new journey - literally and otherwise," she said.

I got a feeling that she was trying to tell me more than I understood. I thought of asking her, but decided this was not the right time.

Right now, I was going to ensure that her metro rides turned out to be smooth and hassle-free. After all, she was my responsibility while in Delhi.