

Foreword by FORMER CHIEF JUSTICE OF INDIA Mr R C LAHOTI

ONE DREAM IS NOT ENOUGH

A MEMOIR OF GRAND AMBITIONS,
DREAMS AND CHALLENGES



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BOOK ONE

INDIAN IDENTITY



What is Impossible?

“**M**umbai to London by road. Most people would think that’s a little bit crazy. Many people will think that’s impossible. Even I thought so. Well, not my grandparents. I’m going on this fantastic road trip without my parents. I’m told it’s going to be an experience of a lifetime. Which I’m sure it is. Anyone of any age can enjoy it.

“Along with this road trip, I’m going to raise some money. I’m going to try to help poor people who’ve been through tough luck times and restart healthy and fresh lives. I would like to thank my Nana and Nani, my parents and my teachers. Talking about teachers—when my parents went to ask my head teacher’s permission for me to leave, she actually turned up more excited than me. I thought I could get away from doing homework, but there was no escape. Homework *toh karna hi padega*.

“Well, wish me luck!”

Nishi stepped off the stage and the crowd burst into applause. We didn’t know it then, but she’d won the hearts of everyone who had attended the flag-off ceremony. With her British-accented words fresh in our minds, on March 23, 2017, we were flagged off from Goregaon Sports Club grounds.



Flagged Off!

“Uff. That’s done,” said Nishi happily, settling into the backseat. I was driving, and Pushpa was sitting in the passenger seat. Our drive to London was yet to start but we had fallen into the configuration we would follow almost throughout the journey. I drove us back home that evening. The real adventure was to begin the next day, with a smaller and more intimate flag-off from my family.



At 10 am the next morning, I looked into the rear-view mirror while pulling Sohumi out of the narrow lane outside my house. My entire family stood there in one frame—my children, their children, my brothers with their families. I accelerated and Sohumi obeyed. After all the months of dreaming and planning, this was really happening.

The day I had first thought of driving to London was fresh in my memory. We were flying to London—you know, like normal people do. Usually, Pushpa takes the window seat and I sit in either the middle or the aisle seat. This time, a lady sat next to me in the aisle seat. I was

thrilled—who wouldn't be if they got a chance to sit between two pretty women? Pushpa did not share my excitement though. Before the flight could take off, she asked me to switch places.

It was a full moon night, and the Alps were shining as if aglow from the inside. If Pushpa wouldn't have switched seats, would I have looked down at the Alps from such a height? I wondered aloud, "The Alps look so beautiful. What if we drove through them to London rather than fly over them? It'd be such an epic journey."

Pushpa was used to my crazy ideas and dismissed my musings with a single "hmmm." But the idea bore a hole in my head and stayed there. This was in 2011.

Once back home, in my spare time, I started poring over maps of India trying to chart a course to London. One cannot really drive across the Himalayas, so the North was out. The mountains cross over to the east as well, covering Tibet, Nepal and all the adjoining countries. It was a no go. The south, of course, held the seas, so wouldn't make for a driving trip.

To the west, we had Pakistan and Afghanistan. This is the most logical route, geographically speaking. But I had no wish to test fate with the tensions between India and Pakistan. I'd also read about a couple who were trying to cross into India via Afghanistan and were jailed for a few days before they were expelled out of the country, and sent back the way they had come. Not a position I wanted to be in, let alone anyone from my family.

I was disheartened. But the thought never left me. I had to do it, the only question was how.

"What's our plan of action?" asked Nishi, bringing me back to the drive.

"First stop is Nashik. We'll have lunch there," said Pushpa. Immediately, Nishi opened the map of India and started studying it. I'd marked the route on it and we had several more different-sized maps with better details of the places we'd be visiting. It'd be a folly to depend only on technology.

“How did you even come up with this entire route, Nana?”

I smiled. “In 2012, I read about this man, Tushar. He’d driven all the way from London to Delhi. When I read that, I knew I had to find out how he had done it. I’d been trying to find a way to London and here was a man who had done the reverse route. I sent him an email and he happily replied. The trick to driving to the west is to first go east. All the way into Myanmar cut north through China and go around Afghanistan entirely.

“I started planning right away—the countries I’d have to cross, the hotels and everything. When I was adding the final touches to the plan, Tushar told me that they were planning to organise the same trip commercially. If I could wait, we could all do it together. So I waited. A couple of years rolled by and my want to drive to London had turned into a need. Finally, Tushar called. Their plan was almost set, and he would love for me to join them. I said yes instantly. I then asked Pushpa who did not even blink before saying yes. And just like that, we were on.”

“And we’ll be travelling through what, 20 countries?” asked Nishi.

“18, *Beta*.”

“That’s basically 18 more than I’ve been in, yay!”

I smiled again. I was glad the sense of adventure had been passed down to the next generation.

“But first, Nishi, we will cross a lot of India.”

If all went to plan, it would take us three weeks to reach the Eastern-most point of India, Imphal. That’s when the real adventure would start with Tushar and his partner, Sanjay, from Adventures Overland. This gave me an excellent opportunity to show Nishi the Indian mainland. She lived in the UK and had seen very little of India.

If I had one regret while charting this course, it was that we wouldn’t be travelling across Rajasthan. I wouldn’t be able to show Nishi our ancestral home. Our family started in Jodhan Ki Nimbi, a small town near Ladnun in the Sujangarh district. My grandfather had four sons, one of whom was adopted by a relative, and two daughters: and all his children moved to Bellary for better business prospects. I was born

and raised in Bellary, Karnataka. After my grandfather passed away in Rajasthan, my grandmother, *dadi*, moved in with us too. I never got a chance to meet my grandfather, but I did spend a lot of time with *dadi*.

She was a sweet lady—and I mean that as literally as it can get. When she went to the temple, she'd carry lumps of jaggery from the grocery stocks at home and distribute it to everyone along the way. Most people called her Gudbai, the jaggery lady. The others in the family were left wondering where all the jaggery disappeared regularly.

Dadi told me stories about the house in Rajasthan, and the copper and brass utensils they owned. When they left for Bellary, they built a false wall to hide the utensils in its cavities. Every few months, one of my father's brothers would take the wall down, wash the utensils and build the wall again. It was a simpler time.

But when my grandparents passed on, the house was split between three of his sons, Premraji, Devkaranji and my father, Prithviraj, who we called Kakaji. Premraji sold his share to Devkaranji. It stayed like that for many years. Only last year, my nephews sold off the entire property without consulting anyone. When we asked their parents, they said they had no idea either.

I still wished we had that piece of legacy with us.

I shook my head. It didn't matter, I would create my own legacy. Our family was whole and strong and prospering. What else could I ask for? In the rear-view mirror, I saw Nishi looking out of the window, excited. I smiled and pressed down slightly on the accelerator. The past was behind us, and Sohumi purred as we sped down the highway towards Nashik, our first stop on the long, long way to London.

Being Schooled

After Nashik, the sights started to change. No more buildings, and many unfamiliar roads. And fewer and fewer familiar faces. Now, along the route, we had camels for company and sometimes, trucks carrying aeroplane wings. Nishi got super excited, and I must confess, her childlike wonder was infectious. Pushpa and I had never seen parts of a plane being transported on the road either.

Around lunchtime, we saw something even more unique. Nishi was the one who noticed it first, “These school children look so happy.” She sounded shocked when she said it.

After a couple of questions with the teachers in charge, we figured out their secret. The kids were from an Indori School, La Sangesse. Every month they were taken out for an ice-cream picnic. We had caught them with their post-ice-cream smiles.

“I wish my school had something like this,” said Nishi.

“What are you complaining about? Your principal was more excited about you taking this trip than *you*. I don’t think my school principal would have ever allowed it.”

“That’s different. Your grandfather would not have driven to London.”

“That’s true.”

After a moment’s pause, Nishi asked, “What was your school like, Nana?”

“My school? It was very different back then. You know, there was no Junior KG or Nursery. At the age of five, you went straight to primary school.”

“But what about the basics? ABCD and addition-subtraction.”

“It all started when we first went to school at five. But I was fortunate to have Bidambaba teach me arithmetic.”

“Who is Bi-Dam baba?” asked Nishi.

“Bidambaba, Radhakrishna-ji Koolwal was his real name. We called him Bidambaba because every few months he’d go to Rajasthan and the mountains in Uttar Pradesh, and bring back almonds which are called *bidam* in Marwadi³. He was my first teacher.”

I told Nishi how Bidambaba had me memorise multiplication tables from 1 to 40 and the tables of the fractions $1/2$, $1/4$, $3/4$ too. We didn’t have calculators in the 1950s. Even when calculators were allowed later in life, thanks to Bidambaba, I never needed them. Many people have been a part of my life journey, but Bidambaba was the first one to propel me forward.

“You seem like you were the kid who would be looked down upon for knowing too much.”

I was a little taken aback by her perceptiveness. “Yes. How did you know?”

“You just seem like a naughty child?”

Pushpa laughed beside me.

“Very smart. But yes, I was. And this not by peers, but by teachers! In one arithmetic class in the fifth standard, my teacher, Mr Honurappa, who was also the principal of the school, was writing a problem on the blackboard along with the solution. There was some calculation error, some multiple of 23 which was wrong, and I pointed it out to him. He quickly rectified the mistake. I thought that was that. But the next Sunday,

³ The language from Rajasthan that we speak at home

he paid us a surprise visit at home. The great advantages of living in a village, everyone knows where everyone else lives. He complained to Bidambaba that I'd tried to insult him in front of the entire class."

Nishi shook her head, "So unfair."

I nodded, "Yes. I tried to explain that my intention was not to upset anyone, but neither of the men would listen to me. Bidambaba gave the principal a free hand to punish me."

"What! I thought Bidambaba was on your side!"

"There were no sides, Nishi. The teacher was always right."

Nishi frowned and folded her arms.

"We were in the courtyard in the centre of Gurnathanam Bungalow where Bidambaba was staying. The principal found a whip, one that was used to direct the bull to our cart, *jhatka*, and started whipping me."

"No!" said Nishi, her mouth open.

"Yes. After two-three lashes, I couldn't bear the pain, and he showed no signs of stopping. So I started running around the yard. He chased me around for a bit, but I was faster. He only stopped when he slipped on his *dhoti* and fell. Thankfully, he did not get hurt or else I'd have been punished harder."

"That's barbaric. A teacher would be arrested if they did that now," said Nishi.

"It was all a part of our education."

"It's not right."

"True. But education was a privilege then. When I got into primary school, there was a *pooja*, a prayer meeting. I was told this was for me and we all prayed to Lord Ganesh and Maa Saraswati. The entire family was there in the same courtyard of the Gurnathanam Bungalow. That is how I took my first steps towards getting a formal education." Thinking about the ice-cream-eating kids, I added, "Things have changed now."

"Thank God they have. I wouldn't let anyone whip me," said Nishi, rolling her eyes.



While planning the trip, the daily drives in India were locked to six hours per day. This gave us ample time for sightseeing in the evening and did not tax us too much. Pushpa and I could drive on for several more hours. We even had Shiva, my man Friday, along with us to take the wheel and help us out, just in case. But with Nishi in the car, I did not want to drive long stretches.

In Bhopal, my friend, Maheswariji, generously insisted on us staying in his hotel. He even arranged a complete tour of the three educational institutes he ran. Nishi was excited to see an Indian institute from the inside.

The institutes reminded me of my secondary school in Bellary, St. John's High School. It had typical colonial British style architecture with extensive grounds. An all-boys convent run by the church. The priest was the principal and the headmaster was Mr Ramaswamy Iyengar. He was a strict disciplinarian and was known for two things—his authority on English grammar and his long fingers which made excellent tools for slapping.

As we walked around the institutes, I told Nishi about my days in school. I was a goalkeeper in the hockey team, and I tried my hand in many sports. Every morning, there was a school-wide prayer meeting assembly. Before the prayers started, the boys who needed disciplining from the previous day were called forward by name and given one or two slaps depending on their crime.

“Did you ever get slapped by the principal?” she asked.

“Yes and no.”

“Eh?”

I laughed. “One day, I was caught climbing the boundary wall beside the huge colonial gate. For fun. I was sure that the next day my name would be called. All night I thought about ways of getting out of it and came up with a simple strategy.”

“Which was?”

“When my name was called the next day, I walked up to the headmaster. Just as he raised his hand to slap me, I sneezed.”

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