

# The Hands That Built Our Future (Part II)

By Shyroose Jaffer Dhalla (on assignment)

**As a response to popular demand and positive feedback from our readers, Ja'fari News is proud to present a continuation to last issue's special feature on the struggles of early immigrants in their quest to make a living in North America.**

Mohamed Nazarali and his young family arrived in Canada, over 27 years ago, on a bitterly cold and snowy day. With little money in his pockets but a great amount of determination in his spirit, Mohamedbhai stepped onto Canadian soil with a fervent prayer. And the rest is history.

"Throughout all the struggles, throughout all the hardwork, my wife, Parin, and I would remind each other that we had made a *conscious decision* to move here in order to make a better life for ourselves. No one had twisted our arms and made us come here. We had legally applied and impatiently waited 18 months for our immigration visas to come through. Now we had to *survive*. No matter what the cost. There was absolutely no way back now."

Survival was not easy. The slightly built 5 foot 2 gentleman found work in a bakery where he would have to lift heavy bags of flour and sugar and pour them into huge vats. And over the next 27 years or so, he never really saw the light of day. **For Mohamed Nazarali was to work the night shift for the next half of his life.**

Working side by side with heavy-set, rough and rugged workers, Mohamedbhai grew accustomed to hearing abusive street-language and teasing comments about his short stature. "They would joke that the difference between them and me was like a small brown, Volkswagon driving beside a fast and strong, white Mercedes," he remembers wryly. "I vowed then, that I would show them that I could lift anything as well as they could. So I pushed myself with all my

will and I would LIFT those 100 pound (45 kilogram) bags and try to make it look as if it was effortless. We worked in pairs and being the shorter person, I would have to lift way higher, almost above myself. Most of the time, I would end up having flour poured all over me or even warm oil splashed over me. But I wouldn't let them see me waver for one second. I matched their pace and their strength and their toughness and a curious thing began to happen: they began to *respect* me. They also saw that I never uttered the swear words that came so easily to their mouths, that I didn't talk about the bad topics that they indulged in and slowly they themselves began to stop talking like that around me."

His wife, Parin, meanwhile, had found work in a busy cosmetics factory and life took on a surreal quality for the Nazaralis. Each day, at 7:00am as Parinbai would head out of the house to get to work, she would open the front door to Mohamedbhai who would be *returning* from his night-shift. A quick greeting and reminder that his cup of tea was waiting on the table and Parinbai would be rushing out into the snowy morning to catch the morning bus. They would meet again for dinner at night before Mohamedbhai would be rushing off to catch the late bus for his night shift. Life would be like this, with it's hurried exchange of hellos and goodbyes at dawn and dusk for the next 25 years.

"The sacrifices were immense, no doubt, but we knew that we were sowing the seeds for the fruits of the future. Things may have been difficult for us, but our children Tasleema (Sheila) and Salim were getting to attend school and have access to opportunities that we had never even been able to dream of when we were young. For my wife and I, giving our children a bright future was a commitment that we had made to ourselves. We were simply living up to that commitment."

Working all night had it's challenges. "The first few days is the worst, I guess. Staying up all night goes



against all of the body's natural instincts," he explains. "At first you feel so very tired and your eyes burn all the time. Then there's the recurring headaches and inability to concentrate and you feel nauseous all the time. Eventually, you experience this unnatural lack of appetite and, of course, irritability. Working nights was definitely not a desirable option but it was all I had. So I did my best to deal with it. Sometimes, it helped to go and splash ice cold water on my face at regular intervals and to try and convince myself that it was broad daylight outside. That my life was normal."

A full night of hard-work was followed by a long commuter route for Mohamed bhai that consisted of 3 bus changes and subway ride. "I would get home at 7:00 and find the driveway full of snow. So I'd shovel, fighting sleep all the way. Then, I would walk or drive the kids to school. They were too young to cross at lights and sometimes the snow would be up to the knees. Then, I'd eat some breakfast, read the paper or listen to the news. For me, doing such regular things was essential to keeping up a reasonable quality of life. Trying to sleep during day-light hours can be difficult sometimes so I would draw the curtains and convince myself that it was night. Other times, I would be lying in bed, trying to sleep and it would just be eluding me for hours! A busy night at work or some conflict with a co-worker would have me tossing and turning with the words 'it WASN'T my fault!' ringing in my head. By the time I'd fall asleep, the kids would return at 3:30 and no matter how much they tip-toed, I would wake-up. And soon, Parin would return from work and the hustle-bustle of cooking would begin. We made dinner times important family sessions to keep abreast of each others' lives and to bond as a family. Heading off to work, I would find fresh snow from the day on the ground so I would shovel that and then

catch the late night bus to work."

Mohamedbhai attempted to do rotary shifts which meant alternating weeks of just with some day shifts but that just meant playing havoc with a system that had barely managed to accustom itself to the hours. The physical side-effects were debilitating at times but more adversely, it meant less time with the family. "When I worked the day-shifts, I would miss seeing the family totally because I would be leaving for work when everyone would still be at work and school, and returning when the whole family would be asleep. For some time, the only contact I had with the family was in the form of notes on the refrigerator door! Sometimes I would arrive in the middle of the night and the children would be waiting to see me because they would be missing me so much."

"I wasn't the only one in this situation," he says sadly. "There were other Ithna-Asheri men out there, doing the same kind of tough, bone-breaking hard-labour night shifts. My close friend, Marhoom **Mohamed-Taki Kara Wali**, who passed away this Ramadhan, also worked the night shift for over 20 years. We would meet at majlis and compare our stories. Marhoom never missed a majlis, not even a Thursday night majlis and he would always say, "Mohamed, we have to go on. We can't complain about the conditions. The supervisors don't care, they'll just say the 'door is open, you can leave if you don't like the work'. All we can do is complain to Allah (s.w.t) and pray that he gives us strength, that's all."

For someone with such a busy schedule, finding time to attend majlises may have been too difficult, but Mohamedbhai always made it his priority. "We didn't have a car and in the 70's majlises were held in warehouses and Seneca College etc. so *getting* there was a challenge in itself. But there was no question about not attending. Parin and my little daughter would manage to get a ride from other families and Salim

and I would take the bus to the majlis. Then, half-way through the majlis, I would put on my coat and head off to my night-shift, leaving them to find a ride home with someone. To this day, I pray to Allah (s.w.t) to reward those people who gave us those rides. Helping someone reach the mosque is truly a great form of worship. I can never forget the kindness of those people."

He looks pensive, deep in thought. "You know, it's a tough world out there, "he says philosophically. "The world is tough, nasty, arrogant. It tries to get you down. But once you allow yourself to feel oppressed you leave yourself open to defeat and to thoughts that we often hear from non-Muslim people such as, 'I'll kill myself'. NO WAY! You have managed to come this far, managed to cross all those red lines and now you want to go back? Never!"

Working nights did not mean that the responsibilities of family life escaped him. "We owned a house by then and Parin would leave me notes on the fridge door about repairs needed around the house and I would have to fix those things during my catch-up-on-sleep time. Sometimes we would make time during the day to have a phone conversation or have some time together in the evenings before I had to rush off to work. We had to make an effort that our relationship as a family received nurturance too. Our little family supported each other. My wife would say, 'Mohamed, if you are working so hard to support the family, then I will work to do that too. She was my faithful companion in our struggles."

Tragedy struck in 1983 when Mohamedbhai was struck by a car on his way back from work. He suffered massive fractures, in 3 places in some bones and doctors feared that he may never walk again. Mohamedbhai lay in hospital for 3 months as he struggled with physical disability, a mortgage rate of 18.75% (they had a floating interest rate) and slim chances of returning to a job that required top physical shape. "I always believe that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. And I never wanted to be a cry baby in my life. I

feel no matter how big a problem is, you have to fight yourself out of it. Never, ever disappoint yourself. Keep going."

In six months, Mohamed Nazarali was *walking, and back at work*. "I thank Allah (s.w.t) for the gift of life, each day. So many times, in my long commutes, I have narrow misses on the road and at work and I thank Allah (s.w.t) for giving me life. Today, I can live like a king because I am satisfied with myself for doing my best. There was a time, when I would get up in the middle of the majlis to leave for work and people would look at me all confused, like, 'where is this guy going?' Some would ask, 'why come to majlis at all if you only get half of it?' But it is exactly my religion and my faith that has kept me going."

He smiles quietly. "It was Islam that taught me about commitment, about responsibility to your family and to your parents. About doing your best to provide to your family. And it was Islam and the protection of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s) that helped me survive. It is purely by the sadqa of the Ahlul Bayt(a.s) that there was food on our table. How could I not pay my respects to them, even if it meant half a majlis? I owe my whole happy family to them."

He proudly bounces his grandchildren on his knee and helps dress them in their winter coats for a family outing. And then he smiles a contented smile. "It has all, definitely, been worth the effort."

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churned out rows and rows of potatoes for inspection. All day long, we would handle rotten, smelly potatoes and we had to work extremely fast. We were not allowed to talk or even look away from our task. The supervisors would be watching us closely and if you didn't pay attention you could lose your job on the spot."

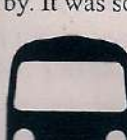
Our history in Canada as Khoja-Ithnaasheri's began not too long ago. Canada's initial, strict immigration policies made it difficult for visible minorities, especially of South-East Asian origin, to enter this country. By the time immigrants from India and China were finally allowed to enter Canada, pioneers from European countries such as Poland, Italy, the Ukraine and Germany had already had time to establish roots and adjust to the physical, social and financial climate. Our pioneer community was at a social disadvantage and this fact presented us with many issues such as racism, unemployment and class barriers. In such an atmosphere, it was up to families who arrived here some 30 years ago, to pave the way for future generations to gain education and gain the social mobility that their immigrant counterparts had already achieved. Today, our community boasts of a population that is highly educated, occupies a significant portion of the professional sector and is increasingly experiencing a growth in social standards. The role that the mothers of our community have played in helping us reach these milestones cannot be underestimated.

"It was important for us to see our children prosper", explains Fatmabai Dahya. "My husband and I wanted to provide our children with the opportunity to fully concentrate on their education. We were even hesitant to allow them to work during their summer holidays because we felt that it may distract or even tempt them into prematurely leaving their studies."

**Zebunnissa Merali** becomes serious when she remembers her years as a blue

collar worker. "I came here as a new bride 23 years ago and although my family had prepared me for life in Canada by sending me to expensive English classes, I found it difficult to understand when people spoke to me in English. They spoke so fast and their accent was different to what I had been accustomed to. When I began to work in a factory that made frozen pizzas, it was a huge culture shock. Everyday, I would have to walk to the bus stop in the bitter cold and then go on to change two buses. At work, I would have to stand all day and put pizza fillings on pizza crusts as they went by on an assembly belt. The other women who worked there would caution me to stay away from the cold, cold sections of the factory, saying I would get arthritis in the future. Even so, the working conditions were very difficult. It was hot, despite the freezers, and we only got a 10 minute break. All day, standing there with gloves on, doing the same thing each day like a machine and not even being allowed to talk to anyone used to be so depressing. I used to just cry."

**Roshanbai Turab**, who helped Nasira Jaffer find her factory job, recounts those difficult days in the assembly line and her own tears, as well. "I was widowed at an early age and left with 3 small children to bring up all by myself as an immigrant in a strange country. Today, when young people see me as just another old woman sitting in the mosque, I wish I could tell them how I also have had to work for a living in this country. It's nice to see how our community has blossomed but there are sad, sad stories behind these successes. Right now, my health is not what it used to be, and I don't feel well enough to give a more detailed interview. Someday, I will tell your readers about my experiences. About how I used to fall in the snow and I would push myself up and push myself to go on. About the tears that I cried as I would be standing there in that assembly line with those potato chips going by. It was so difficult."



"We immigrants are a faithful lot", explains Zebunnissa Merali. "We feel so loyal to our employers that it is difficult for us to change jobs, even if the conditions are terrible. I was lucky that a relative took me to the factory that she worked in and encouraged me to seek employment there. The work was relatively easier as we had to unpack shirts and place them in hangers. I worked there for almost 11 years."

**Zehrabai Nasser**, who came to Canada 22 years ago as a young widow describes her own experiences working in a factory as a very positive one. "I had plenty of family support so there wasn't really a need for me to work but I have always been an active person and I needed to do something to occupy my time. I worked in an auto parts factory; luckily, the young owner had taken some courses in management so he really knew how to make the place a pleasant place to work in. We were allowed to talk and laugh and there were frequent leisure trips to various places such as Canada's Wonderland, African Lion Safari, boat cruises and Christmas parties. Even though I changed 3 buses and worked in winter, I looked forward to work because it made me feel smart, helped me make friends and encouraged me to use my brains. I was busy and it gave me less time to think and grieve. I learned how to have my own bank account, pay the rent and improve my English. After 10 years in the same factory I built some strong friendships and I still keep in touch with those people."

Fatma Dahya's experiences of factory work continued from the steel plant to an audiocassette factory. Here, she was allowed to sit, but the work involved intense concentration and precision since she essentially assembled a whole cassette *entirely by hand*. "I made from one to two thousand cassettes a day, depending on how energetic I felt. I would have to wind tape on a spool, place it between the two cassette covers anchoring it with little sponges and buttons and then I would secure the two covers. My eyes would feel tired and watery, my fingers would ache from all the intricate work and my back would

*continued...*