

Pursuing
Freedom
in the
Land
of the
Dalai Lama

*words & images
by Varisha Tariq*

Am I being stupid or brave? I constantly kept questioning myself. I was sitting, at 8 pm, at a bench near my bus stop. I had a white trolley suitcase, which had swirls of green on it. This suitcase has been with me, as I leave one home to rebuild another, as I have travelled to different countries, and now, when I was escaping, I think. I was shaking, and it wasn't from cold but from the absolute fear of my decision. Sometimes, the first step is really that hard. For a few days, I just wanted to be a person. Not plus-sized, not Muslim, not a woman. Just a human being

In my college, a woman of a marginalised¹ class was denied immediate access to healthcare for a medical emergency that happened on my floor, where I was the Resident Assistant. The event left me angry and a little confused. At 21, studying liberal arts in my classroom, I thought, like many young college students, I was going to change the world by storm. But a big reality check, in terms of this experience, came in before I graduated. Restless, I felt the meaning of life slip from me. In my background, my own marginalised identity as a plus-sized Muslim woman sometimes held me down. I had big dreams, and they did not involve climbing traditional corporate ladders or pursuing a job with the government. Instead, I wanted to be a writer or the Prime minister of the country. In a culture where women are denied education for any possible reason, how would I convince myself to pursue my unconventional dreams?

¹In India, Muslims are a marginalised class owing to being a minority, being economically the most weak and especially due to the rise of the current Islamophobic right wing government. As a woman, the intersectionality heightens for Muslims, because gender based discrimination is extremely high in India as well.

²Dalai Lama is the highest spiritual leader of Buddhism. While their place of origin is in Tibet, in 1959, owing to the conflicts between China and Tibet, he was forced to escape and he took refuge in Dharamshala, India. This is where his temple and his office is situated. Many people from Tibet migrated to this space, making Dharamshala a home to Buddhists.

Ever since I was three, I wanted to spend my time travelling, but in a culture where travelling is a measurement of your privilege, and as a Muslim woman, this was a luxury that I had to fight for. At 21, my heart felt caged. The narrative I had internalised in my life allowed for far more liberties than what my culture allowed. I was not stuck in a community, I was stuck in a subcontinent that viewed non-traditional careers and travelling as unnecessary for women and had no space for the life I wanted to pursue.

I booked bus tickets to the home of the Dalai Lama², Dharamshala. I have heard stories of people who went there only to have found peace and passion. For me, it was more than just a gateway. It was the spark that ignited the fire of my freedom and taught me the one thing my internalised narrative did not know: my freedom to choose how I lived my life would be a battle I would be fighting for a long time.



I met three incredible women from different stages of their lives who had a significant impact on me.

The first person I met when I reached Dharamshala was Naina, who was from Bangalore and was in Dharamshala to heal from her recent divorce. She told me about her emotionally abusive marriage, how she couldn't understand why it didn't work, or why he didn't care enough. She took me

to the temple of the Dalai Lama and shared with me how she spends hours chanting here despite being a Hindu. For her, this brought in a different peace, fixing what it didn't break. The temple was one of the most serene places I had ever visited, I felt peace reach every cell of my body.

While Indian culture is mostly associated with temples and colours and Bollywood, the truth is that there

also exists many other subcultures that have a great influence, especially on the marginalised population. For example, Buddhism, from Tibet to Dharamshala, is an incredible peaceful space which many, from all around the world, pursue. In the same culture of India, you can find thousands of subcultures that all differ from one region to another. There are, and I am not exaggerating, a million ways to be alive in this country, and it is devastating when we try to force ourselves to be one.



The next day, I met an Australian Lawyer, Natasha. She had a haunted look on her face as she was watching fireworks go off, standing on the terrace of the hostel, overlooking the mountains. She eventually told me how damned the life of a divorce lawyer was, and how deeply it had broken her. She ran away from that because all she needed was peace and freedom from her old life, but her family, including her adult children, didn't understand why she had to leave to come all the way to India. It felt like I was witnessing someone going through their own version of 'Eat, Pray, Love'.

Later on that same night, I met a thirty-year-old American woman, Claire, who, after working eight years at the UN peacebuilding mission, wanted to reclaim her life and live selfishly. I didn't know then, but the conversations with these three women, from different cultures and worlds, but all seeking freedom and peace, would impact me for a long time to come. I realised that day that noble or successful work, or a marriage that looks good on paper, if not pursued out of love for yourself, will destroy parts of you that you'll grieve for a lifetime. I understood that whatever I chose to do with life, I had to love it for my sake, not for anyone else's.

On my trip, I pushed myself out of my comfort zone. I did one thing that I never thought I would do; I did

a trek. Dharamshala did not have very high mountain ranges yet, and while climbing, I felt fear at how haunting the depth looked. If I were to trip, my body would be erased from this world like it never existed at all. They surrounded me like majestic ladies, lying down with one leg on top of the other, their heads on the stomach of the other. The mountain ranges felt like friends in leisure, watching many passersby push themselves. I told myself I would only trek halfway, knowing full well my limitations.

Maybe it was the air that was filtering out my thoughts, maybe it was the silence that would echo even your breath, or maybe it was the fact that at this moment, I had forgotten who I was, just what I could do. If I were the woman these mountain ranges were, and not the one my culture expected me to be, maybe this tumultuous, and inexplicable life would be meaningful again.

When I was halfway, a person I had met only yesterday put his thumb and index finger in a 'c' shape before me and said, "This is what you are scared of?" Between his fingers, the rest of the trip was just a Polaroid picture.

With me, I had two men whom I had only met last night. They were 26 and 28 years old. In India, women are very unsafe owing to the high number of rape cases. And so, in hindsight, this could have been a very stupid decision.

But my intuition told me that I was safe. Throughout the journey, they kept pushing me. Every time I wanted to turn back, they would show me how little was left. They could have reached it in two hours, but they chose to slow down even when it was taking way too long. "If the goal was to reach there early, we would have gone alone. The whole point is to reach it together," one of them said. They were strangers, yet I felt a kinship at experiencing this journey together.

Instead of thinking of the kilometres left, I thought of just taking the next step. In the next three hours I became thankful for smooth steps and prayed through rocky ones. When I was climbing up on shaky and steep ground, I had already surrendered to the universe to take care of me.

At Sunset, I saw my final path, my final push. And I started to cry. My whole life, I had thought of something so physically excruciating to be impossible for me, and I couldn't believe I had pushed through something so incredible.

When I stood at the mountain top, I saw the setting of the sun. It felt wonderful, and yet, it wasn't enough. I don't think I was being greedy, but it almost felt like the trajectory of my life depended on what this trek showed me.

And god, did it show me. When the sun had set, and I came out of my tent, what I witnessed had forever changed my perspective of the world. I was looking at the Milky Way galaxy and feeling my heart expand to limits it did not know existed before. And it truly was the Milky Way Galaxy. The spirals, the billions of stars, the colours, the sky that was purple. I felt as if the Himalayas, visible from my mountaintop, were holding the sky full of stars in their arms. Even while everyone slept, I continued to look at them. At 2 am, when the temperature had dropped to -3°C , and I had no proper jacket, I was still looking at the sky. Shivering, but I couldn't believe just exactly what I had come to.

I had no clue that five years later when I would be making life-altering decisions and moving countries, it would be these conversations I would be thinking of. Or this one adventure, that would drastically change the way I looked at myself. I was the Muslim, I was the woman, and I was plus-sized. The silence of the mountains, the shimmer of the stars, and the women and men of my journey made me realise that these terms didn't define me, I defined them. I added to it, and it did not reduce me.

I decided to pursue multiple careers at once. Everything that made me happy was to be pursued. I am a writer, a journalist, a diversity inclusion specialist, NGO founder, a politician and real estate agent. At any given time, I am pursuing three things at once because I pursue everything out of love and freedom and don't do anything that my heart doesn't necessarily subscribe to. And I am also, often, the woman those Triund mountains were. With my legs over

each other, my head on my friends' stomachs, together with my feminist friends, I am building the dream of living with love, joy, ambitions and peace.

