

Hajj Stories

Not just another unknown

September 2020



Dr Salim Parker

He lay on his bed on his right side. He looked serene and content. Life may not have been as financially kind to him as for others in his group but his genes advantaged him with physical and mental stamina. He shared a room with eight others in Aziziya, a suburb just outside Makkah. He was on his first Hajj. It was also the first time he ever boarded an aircraft to fly to the Holy Land. He was born in a small village somewhere in central India and has seen a large city only a few times in all of the seventy-two years that he toiled along tilling the sparse earth that belonged to him. His wife had departed a decade before, but they had four children who were determined to honour him by scraping some of their meagre earnings together so that he could embark on the final pillar of Islam. It was also to be his final journey.

He did not know a single person from his immediate area who accepted the invitation to grace the plains of Arafat but he did not hesitate in setting forth on his first long trip. The travel agent of the budget package, which was all that he could afford, tried as best as he could to group him with compatible com-

panions. He was an introvert, spoke a slightly different dialect to his seven roommates but largely did what the group of a few hundred collectively did. He was present at every tawaf, during every ziyarat and sat with his roommates at every meal but said very little. His presence was barely noticed but his absence would have been evident. It was at one lunch session that his usual presence was absent. It was a few days before the first day of Hajj. He showed no signs of sickness earlier. After waiting a while, one of the fellow Hujjaaj decided to check up on him and went to his room.

‘It was also to be his final journey.’

I had an uncle and some other family from India also performing Hajj that year. At about that time I was having lunch with them in the same building and as usual, there were a number of medical queries from a number of pilgrims. It was always nostalgic to meet with family that I have not seen for decades. Hajj is a time to reconnect and reminisce, to talk about what was, what could have been and what could still be. We all have the intention to build upon family trees, to permanently reconnect

with those closest to us in our blood lines. Fate and poor prospects drove my father from his small rural Indian village to seek better prospects in Cape Town. Part of his earnings were sent for the upkeep of his parents and siblings in India. It was with some of them that I was meeting.

‘Is there a doctor around?’ someone asked frantically in Urdu. We doctors, always avail ourselves on journeys like these and my uncle proudly and hastily introduced me as a medic. I was requested to assess the single gentleman who did not have a communal meal for the first time in nearly a month. He was found on his bed and seemed sound asleep. We went to the room where by now a few people had gathered. He was laying on his right hand side and someone had positioned him to face Qibla. I approached the bed and gently reached out for his hand to feel for a pulse. I always carry my medical equipment with me but somehow instinctively realised that it would not be necessary. He was dressed in very nondescript clothes, plain white but faded wide subcontinental pants and a similar khurta. His sinewy feet and hands reflected his years of labour. He had a peaceful and content look on his face. He was no more.

Some members of the group’s medical mission entered the room and announced that everyone should leave. That initially included me but after protestations by some in the room that I was the first doctor on the scene, I was rather reluctantly asked to stay and stepped back to let the official doctors take over. The

deceased occupied the lower of a double bunk, and there were four of these in a room to accommodate the eight pilgrims in each room. Some had substantially sized suitcases stored under or next to their beds and it at times was an indication of the financial status of their owners. Some had designer labelled bags, some had designer names spelt in a variety of different ways and others only had plastic bags housing their essentials. He had a small bag that most likely

contained all his belongings. Next to it was a packet that contained a pristine Ihram that now will never be worn. The room had no cupboards and the pilgrims literally only had their bed and their small luggage space as their own.

They were all content and I never heard them complaining as they accepted it as part of their journey. Ablution and dining facilities were communal, and most activities such as shopping were done in groups. This day he however left the room on his own and added to his meagre belongings, for on his bed next to him were two small shopping

to get to know him well. The hajj operator mentioned that the Hajjee never complained, accepted everything without questioning, participated in all activities and did not owe anyone anything. He willingly gave when the opportunity arose but in a manner that went unnoticed. Somehow the profound realisation set in that they had to complete his journey.

There was a member who performed Hajj on a previous occasion and very quickly he volunteered to don his Ihram on behalf of the deceased. It seems that everyone was acutely aware of the small gifts he bought and



Qibla is constant, every Tawaaf is different

bags. In the one was toy cars and other gadgets clearly bought for his grandsons. In the other were dolls and small trinkets. A number of small shops in his immediate vicinity stock tons of these types of toys. It may be very cheap, but the fact that it was bought during Hajj usually means the world to the recipient. He evidently had just returned from his first shopping spree. My presence in the room was clearly superfluous and after politely greeting, I exited the room. Outside his roommates were still shocked by the turn of events.

Somehow my minimal Urdu and their rudimentary English was enough to initiate meaningful conversation and this was greatly facilitated by my bilingual family members. They all admitted to not really making attempts

two fellow pilgrims who lived a few hours’ drive away from his village offered to take all his belongings to his family once they returned home. I marveled at the bonds that were developing around him. He came as an individual and sadly departed as one. He however ignited and fostered the spirit of them all being part of one family and his family at home will be comforted by this. His name was to be mentioned on the plains of Arafat, and even though as someone already on the journey his Hajj was accepted, he would stand with all of us in Wuqoof. When we all exclaimed ‘Labaik!’ he truly would echo: ‘Oh Allah, I am here.’

salimparker@yahoo.com