

MAYOR OF LONDON

Listen closely, every Londoner has a story to tell

By Shama Nimkar

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BACKGROUND

Moving into a new city can be a challenging experience. Living away from home and loved ones can prove to be quite unsettling. New friendships and relationships are what can keep a person going. Exploring the topic further, this essay lets the reader peek into the writer's first-hand interactions with the people of London city in her first few days here. Focusing on the concept of finding a home away from home, it talks about how friends can become family and the importance of these relationships when living in a new environment.

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As the plane drew closer to the ground, I looked outside the window to observe vague landscapes taking the form of roads, buildings and towers; taking the form of London. Catching a glimpse of the city that was going to be home for the year to come neither got me excited, nor nervous. Instead, I was consumed by a feeling of void.

Coming to London for further studies had been a long-chased dream that was finally coming true! Maybe, it was just the thought of staying away from home that was bothering me. The thought of having to live without my family for an entire year was unsettling and made me anxious.

An Uber ride to remember

Shortly after landing at Heathrow, I remember calling an Uber to take me into town. “Welcome to London, my child,” exclaimed Abrar, my driver. The bright smile on his face and the warmth in his tone were already making London seem a little less alien to me. As we walked towards the parked vehicle, I noticed that Abrar was a stout middle-aged brown man, who seemed more than familiar to the city and its ways. Right from referring to a random stranger as ‘mate’ and asking him if he was alright, to waving out at several individuals on airport duty, his affinity with London and its people was evident.

On our way to my accommodation, we got chatting and he happened to narrate to me his journey to becoming a Londoner. Abrar is a native from a majorly Muslim dominated nation. Having been born and raised in a strictly conservative environment, he was taught to follow his religion and its norms extremely seriously. However, as he grew up, he began realising that the kind of life that he was expected to lead was a path, dominated by the idea of blind faith rather than having the freedom of choice. For example – he always wanted to educate his daughters and give them the freedom to dress up the way they wanted to but his relatives and community members thought otherwise. Being a feminist at heart, he found it difficult to express his views in an environment that didn’t encourage women to speak up. “I love my daughters and want them to have the kind of freedom that we, as men enjoy,” said he. When he tried to explain this to his family members, he was viewed as an individual conspiring against his own faith. “I had been forced to flee my homeland along with my family before finally settling in London,” he said. When I asked him if he misses home, he replied, “For me, home is London. It may not be my motherland but it’s been kinder to me than any other place that I’ve lived in before.”

Abrar had been extricated from his community for questioning certain traditional practices after which his outlook towards religion, people and life completely changed. Throwing light on the same, he said, “this city has embraced me with open arms. It’s been 12 years since I relocated and I’ve never looked back. People here have been very accepting and

helpful. In fact, its people from outside by ethnicity who I can connect with much more rather than people from my own kin,” he explained.

Now, this was hard for me to imagine. Back in India, it used to be difficult for me to relate to individuals from different cities, let alone bonding with people from a whole new country. Little did I know that two months down the line, I’d be nodding in agreement to Abrar’s statement.

What I also didn’t understand is that living in a multi-cultural community does not need one to shed away their religious and cultural identity but to be able to embrace it along with that of those you’re surrounded by. Afterall, being able to co-exist with members from different backgrounds and respecting their culture is an idealistic setting of a harmonious society. It is in fact observed that a lot of Londoners tend to hold the very same ideologies toward outsiders. It is their warm vibe that makes an outsider feel comfortable in the city within no time.

When we reached my accommodation, Abrar handed me his card and said “Take care, child. If you ever find yourself in trouble, do not hesitate to give me a call and I’ll be there.” I smiled at him and waved him goodbye until he went out of sight. In fact, according to the survey conducted by the Greater London Authority (GLA), 81% of the Londoners exhibit a feeling of belonging towards the city. One might be surprised to find out that migrant communities like those of the Hindus and Muslims feel just as close to the city as any other Londoner. However, these communities are much more attached to their local area than the city as a whole.¹

Settling in

I discovered that I was going to be sharing a flat with people of five different nationalities. Our flat comprises people from UK, China, India, Sri Lanka, Columbia and India. In the beginning, none of us had anything to talk to one another about except for the exchange of basic pleasantries and asking questions pertaining to the courses that we were pursuing. However, a few days later my Sri Lankan flatmate, Nisha, fell extremely sick and we all rushed to help her out. It was then when we actually began to get to know one another.

After that day, there has been no going back. Our friendship only went on to bloom further in the days to come. We began to cook for one another. Freya, Nisha and I began borrowing clothes from one another. Yuankai continues to marvel us with perfectly cooked Chinese meals! On Freya’s birthday, the boys cooked us a lovely dinner and we danced to music. I introduced them to Bollywood music and they loved it! Fernando introduced us to quality Spanish music and we drank till we all passed out.

¹ Survey of Londoners, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/survey-of-londoners-headline-findings>).

London – a melting pot of cultures

It's the ethnic diversity that makes London such a melting pot of cultures. The exchange of cultures is a major contributor to the progressive lifestyle led by Londoners. According to the GLA database, 45 % of Londoners borrow things and exchange favours with their neighbours. Londoners aged 25-34 and those who are newer to their local area are substantially less likely to interact with their neighbours than other groups.² For people like my flatmates and I, London has proven to be a new chapter in our lives. London has been the much-needed change that we all needed to move on from our past to start new beginnings.

For me, London has been all about building new friendships and connections. For someone else, it might be a place to embark upon new beginnings and journeys or even seizing career opportunities. To others, it maybe a place find love. Speaking of the same, one Londoner told the GLA team of how London became her home. "I came to London when I was 9, I'd lived in East Africa and Switzerland and Devon before that. I came with a Devonshire accent and the kids in my school thought I was Australian. I felt unsettled. I didn't think I'd like it but over time it's become absolutely 100% home. I love going through the parks. I got married here, had my son here at St. Thomas's hospital and that's made it home," she said, with a smile on her face.³

It's all about humanity in the end!

After having met my flatmates, I've realised that it's not the nationality, religion or community that gets you friends, it's the simple human connect that develops or shapes a bond among people. Many a times, you feel like you're struggling with life but it's when you talk to people and get to know them, you realise that life is the same for everyone. We all face the same highs and lows but it's all a part of the learning process, isn't it? However, showing the courage to overcome those problems is what makes their story worth telling. And if you listen closely, every Londoner has a story to tell!

² Survey of Londoners, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/survey-of-londoners-headline-findings>).

³ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

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