

Dr. Shireen Lakhani: A Lady Doctor Who Served Refugees in 1947

They left India for Pakistan in August 1947 with only two things: a Quran on their heads and Pandan in their hands. As these particular Muslim migrants streamed into Karachi, coming by train and on foot, they met individuals like Dr. Shireen Lakhani, waiting to help.

Dr. Lakhani, now in her 70s, is one of the rare individuals left from her generation who witnessed one of the largest migrations of the twentieth century. But she not only watched history in the making. She also participated first hand in helping Muslims fleeing to the newly created state of Pakistan in 1947.

In an interview with YesPakistan.com from her home in Montreal, Canada, Dr. Lakhani recently shared her memories of a time that few Pakistanis today ever experienced.

Dr. Lakhani was a student at Lady Harding Medical College in New Delhi, India between 1942 and 1947. At the time, this was the only women's medical college in the entire Indian subcontinent.

She had just received her results from medical school on August 10, 1947 and was at home in Karachi, the city of her birth, where she received several telegrams from professors congratulating her. She was at the top of her class. Her teachers wanted her to come back to New Delhi to complete her house job. Dr. Lakhani refused, knowing that Azadi was in four days. She was fully committed to supporting Pakistan.

"They reserved the best job for me," she says of her professors. "But I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay in Pakistan so I went and joined my first house job in the Civil Hospital in Karachi."

This was where she met the thousands of refugees who entered Pakistan via Karachi after independence. There was a great need for doctors as these migrants entered daily by the thousands. Everyday for a year-and-a-half following independence, after finishing her work at the hospital, Dr. Lakhani would visit six to ten refugee camps and tend to the new arrivals. Most of the camps were set up in tents at schools and compounds. They were within five miles of the Civil Hospital.

Diarrhea, unhygienic conditions and skin problems were luckily the only major problems they had, unlike other refugees who had entered Pakistan from other parts of the country. Although Dr. Lakhani says the migrants seemed to be "psychologically shattered", they were content that they would be safe as Muslims in Pakistan.

Children who had lost their parents were also among the refugees Dr. Lakhani treated. She says when she sees Palestinian refugee children today, she is reminded of these orphans fleeing to Pakistan.

Met the Jinnahs as a student

Dr. Lakhani was involved in philanthropy and charitable efforts before independence, especially as a student at Lady Harding.

"Every year we used to have a charity show within our college. We sold tickets and collected money for the Patients' Welfare Fund," she explains. Students also worked at collecting funds for specific hardship cases.

"In those days, if a patient had pneumonia she would need at least five to seven days treatment and that would cost 450 rupees. At that time 450 rupees was a big thing and no one could afford it. The hospital couldn't afford it, so we used to collect funds from good families that we knew and we used to donate it to the patients," she says.

In 1946, at the height of the Pakistan movement, Dr. Lakhani and 13 other students decided to donate funds they had collected to the Pakistan movement. They had discovered that Fatimah Jinnah, sister of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, was visiting New Delhi, so they contacted her secretary .

When Fatimah Jinnah found out about the students' efforts, she insisted that they drop the collected money off in person so she could meet with them.

"She (Fatimah Jinnah) really received us very, very warmly," recalls Dr. Lakhani. "She made us sit down and she said 'there's a surprise for you. She went inside and what was the surprise she brought? She brought Quaid-e-Azam, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. "

"He said 'most welcome, most welcome,'" Lakhani remembers excitedly. "(He said) we want people like you to be the pillars of Pakistan. You are the future of Pakistan."

The praise and surprise were followed by tea and biscuits with the Jinnahs (the British at that time still had their grip on India, as did their customs). It was about 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon. "That was a memorable day. I can never forget it," Dr. Lakhani says. She never met the dynamic brother-sister duo again.

Still active in volunteer efforts for Pakistan

Today, 54 years after independence, Dr. Lakhani hasn't forgotten Pakistan. Although she has been living in Canada since 1983, she spends November to March every year in Pakistan, volunteering as a doctor. This is only a continuation of the work she did while in Pakistan.

Since 1953, when she established a private practice as a gynecologist and obstetrician, she has delivered 9,000 babies. Dr. Lakhani says almost wherever she goes around the world, she meets people who say they were delivered by her or in her hospital.

Along with her work in this area, she continued to run a free medical dispensary once a week in Karachi in places like Bihar colony, as well as in villages in Sindh. This was before any support from agencies like UNICEF was available, so she would bring her team of doctors and social workers with her in her car, along with the free medicines and for the dispensary .

In addition, in Bangladesh, what was then known as East Pakistan, she opened maternity and child welfare centers in eight cities.

Advice for Pakistani-American doctors

Dr. Lakhani insists that Pakistanis living in North America, especially doctors, give back to Pakistan in a concrete manner. That means making a commitment that goes beyond donating money .

"Many of our hospitals are in terrible condition, whether they are government or private, but especially the government hospitals," she says. "Our doctors who are highly educated, they should work say two to three months a year (in Pakistan). Instead of taking summer vacation here they should go and work there and give treatment to patients (for free)," she advises. "So many surgeries would at least be done."

While Dr. Lakhani doesn't discourage individuals from giving money , she is weary of the corruption prevalent in Pakistan, where funds are often eaten up by bureaucracy instead of used on those for whom they are intended.

"Give money and work also and see that things are running efficiently," she says.