

December 3, 2024

My name is Abid James Khokhar. I was born into a Christian family in Lahore, Pakistan. I am the second last among my 4 brothers and 2 sisters.

Here are the names of the family members:

1. Abid James Khokhar – January 1, 1976 (Father)
2. Nazia Rehmat – July 11, 1981 (Mother)
3. Anoosh Shalva – March 30, 2010 (Son)
4. Shanaya – October 24, 2013 (Daughter)

July 22, 1989: My father used to work as a laborer in a factory that made concrete blocks. He passed away due to liver failure.

April 1990: I had completed my studies up to grade 9 at Nishar High School, Lahore. However, due to financial needs at home, I could not continue my education.

May 1990: I joined a catering team in my area, called Waris Catering Services. This team used to provide services for weddings, birthday parties, funerals, and other events. When I joined, I was appointed as a helper. Within a few months, I learned all kinds of chef cutting styles and how to cook fast food, Indian, and Pakistani cuisines. I then worked with Waris Catering for 12 years.

January 2002 – December 2008: I worked as a chef and head chef in various well-known restaurants and hotels in Lahore. Below are my work experiences:

1. Kitchen chef at Little Chef, Country Kitchen & Take Away, Lahore (Jan 2002 – Dec 2003)
2. Barbeque chef at Salt n Pepper Restaurant, Lahore (Jan 2004 – Oct 2004)
3. Head chef at Dera Restaurant, Lahore (Nov 2004 – Nov 2005)
4. Live counter chef at Pearl Continental Hotel, Lahore (Dec 2005 – Feb 2006)
5. Executive chef at Mirchi Restaurant, Lahore (Mar 2006 – Dec 2008)

December 21, 2008: My elder sister, Ulfat Bashir, arranged my marriage with Nazia Rehmat, a Christian resident of Lahore.

January 9, 2009: I joined Fazal-e-Haq Restaurant, Lahore as a head chef. There, I looked after the production of four different sections of the kitchen: Salad bar, Chinese cuisines counter, Afghani cuisines, and Pakistani cuisines counter.

January 22, 2010: With the help of my younger brother Sajid's friend, Sagar, I moved to Mutam-al-Washam Restaurant in Al-Shakra, Saudi Arabia.

March 30, 2010: My wife called to inform me that our first son, Anoosh, was born. At that time, smartphones were not common, but our restaurant's driver, Babar, was returning from a one-month vacation in Lahore three days later. I asked him to bring photos of my wife and Anoosh. On the fourth day, I saw Anoosh for the first time.

November 12, 2012: According to my restaurant's policy, a one-month leave was allowed every year. However, in 2011, there was no other employee to replace me at the restaurant.

So today, I returned home to Lahore for two months to meet Anoosh and attend my cousin Anil Yousaf's wedding.

January 20, 2013: After finishing my leave, I returned to my job in Al-Shakra. The next day, when I reached the restaurant, my owner, Abdul Ghaffar, introduced me to a newly appointed waiter, Muhammad Irfan, who was also from Lahore and lived just 3 km from my house.

During the introduction, Abdul Ghaffar told Irfan that I was a Christian and also the senior head chef at the restaurant. At that time, I didn't know that Irfan had started harboring hatred for me after hearing this.

Eventually, I noticed that whenever I gave Irfan any instructions, he would ignore me. The first time I asked him to buy groceries, he handed the list back to me, saying it wasn't his job and I should do it myself. I had asked him because another Pakistani employee, Ibrar Ahmed, who usually handled grocery shopping, was on leave in Pakistan.

The second time, I asked Irfan to serve a meal to an Arab family at their table, but instead of listening to me, he passed the instruction to another waiter, Ali. Seeing this, I thought it was odd but ignored it, assuming Irfan might not feel comfortable serving the Arab family as he was new. After the guests left, I asked Irfan to clear the table, but he again told Ali to do it.

Noticing Irfan's behavior, I complained to Ghaffar. Ghaffar asked Irfan why he wasn't following the head chef's instructions. Irfan replied that in Pakistan, such infidels collect garbage from our homes, and here you've appointed him as head chef. Ghaffar understood Irfan's mindset and, being a Pakistani Muslim himself, explained to him that Abid was also a human being like us, and only ignorant people think that way.

However, Irfan truly was ignorant because he frequently showed his ignorance through his actions. Sometimes by complaining to Ghaffar about me, and other times by inviting me to accept Islam.

Irfan started criticizing my cooking style and taste after watching various recipe videos on YouTube. Three to four times a month, he would complain to Ghaffar about my work. Additionally, twice he directly asked me to accept Islam. The first time was five minutes before the restaurant closed, when he stopped me in the kitchen and said if I wanted to live a respectful life on earth, Islam was the only way, and it would also grant me a high status in paradise. I didn't share this with anyone and pretended I was getting late, leaving the restaurant for my apartment.

December 24, 2013: The second time, during the restaurant's Christmas celebrations, Ghaffar had arranged a dinner for 12 staff members, including himself. We combined four tables into a long table, and I personally prepared 29 dishes for the menu. Everyone was enjoying the dinner when I told my co-workers that today was the day Jesus, the savior of the world, was born.

Irfan interrupted, saying, "That's fine, but how can you, an infidel, say that Prophet Jesus is the son of Allah?" Everyone at the table fell silent. Irfan continued, claiming that Prophet Muhammad is the savior of the world and that the Quran states Muhammad is the last prophet. He said if I accepted Islam, I would be respected in both worlds. He added that the cleric in Al-Shakra had promised a reward of 1.2 million rupees for anyone accepting Islam. Seeing Irfan's behavior, Ghaffar fired him from the job.

January 12, 2014: Two days before returning to Pakistan, Irfan came to the restaurant and approached me in the kitchen, saying, "M*****, I will be waiting for you in Pakistan. After all, I am your neighbor."

April 15, 2014: I took a one-month leave to visit Pakistan for Easter celebrations. Two days later, due to Shanaya's illness, I took her to a nearby clinic, Sana General Clinic. On our way back, Muhammad Irfan spotted me with some friends. At that moment, he didn't attempt to harm me, probably because of my daughter. However, as he left, he said, "Welcome back, kafir!"

April 25, 2014: Around 4 PM, Irfan arrived at my house with Imam Abdul Farooq and four other Hafiz from the nearby Sunni Mosque. He knocked on the door and, after shaking hands with me, told Farooq that I was now one of them because I had converted to Islam in Saudi Arabia. Irfan also claimed that he had arranged for me to receive a compensation of 1.2 million rupees from the Al-Shakra cleric.

Upon hearing this, I firmly denied the allegations, stating that I had never converted or received any money. I asked Irfan why he was making such accusations. Irfan, now yelling, called me derogatory names and accused me of apostasy. The commotion brought out Nazia and our neighbor, Riaz, a Muslim. After hearing the situation, Riaz told Irfan that forcing someone to convert was not acceptable and asked him to leave.

April 26, 2014: We were so shaken by Irfan's actions that by 6 PM, Nazia, the kids, and I moved to her sister Anita's house in Shadman Colony. Nazia informed her father about the incident over the phone.

Later that day, due to the stress, my father-in-law, who suffered from depressive disorder, had a severe drop in blood pressure. We rushed him to Ayesha Hospital in Lahore for treatment. After ensuring he was stable, I returned to Anita's house. On my way back from dropping my father-in-law at his home, Irfan, along with three extremists from the Sunni Tehreek, confronted me.

Seeing them, I slowed down, but they caught up to me, threw me to the ground, and began beating me with baseball bats. One of them had a pistol. They continued attacking me until nearby people intervened. Irfan was shouting that I was an apostate and deserved death. One of the extremists advised following Islamic teachings to give two warnings before executing a punishment. Eventually, they left the scene.

The strangers who stopped the attack took me back to Ayesha Hospital. When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a general ward bed, with bandages on my head and medication applied to my bruises.

At 9 PM, I asked a nurse to let me make a phone call. I informed Nazia about everything and asked her to gather our belongings and come to the hospital the next day. We decided to leave Lahore and move to my sister, Lubna Arif's, place in Mariabad.

May 8, 2014: We were still staying at Lubna's house in Mariabad when my father-in-law called me, asking if we were safe. He explained that the previous evening, Irfan, along with two bearded members of the Sunni Tehreek, had come to their house and threatened my brother-in-law, Rashid Rehmat, demanding to know my whereabouts. Irfan warned Rashid that no matter where I went in Pakistan, the Sunni Tehreek would find me.

May 10, 2014: After receiving this alarming call, Nazia and I decided that we could no longer stay in Pakistan. That day, I handed over our passports to Arif's travel agent friend to arrange tourist visas for Thailand.

May 26, 2014: We left for Bangkok, flying out of Allama Iqbal Airport in Lahore.

My Family's Struggle for Survival and Freedom in Bangkok, Thailand:

March 13, 2015: Early this morning, around 5 AM, Nazia, I, Anoosh (5 years old), and Shanaya (2 years old) were sleeping in our one-room apartment when immigration police broke down the door and entered. They woke us up, handcuffed me first, and told Nazia to take the children with her. After taking our original passports, the immigration officers put us in their police vehicle and took us to Samrong Police Station, where we were locked up.

Since it was Friday, we were kept at the police station for two days. On Monday, we were taken to court for an appearance. However, after waiting all day for our turn, the police brought us back to Samrong Police Station without appearing in court.

The next day, with the help of a humanitarian organization that works on children's rights, we were released from the police station. After returning home, we immediately changed our location.

December 15, 2016: This morning at 11 AM, a food distribution event was taking place at the Sabatina Foundation in Udom Suk. I was returning home with my friend and fellow Pakistani asylum seeker, Aslam Mehar, after collecting food when suddenly two policemen on a motorcycle stopped us and asked to see our passports. We showed them our UN cards and explained that we were asylum seekers. Upon hearing this, they detained us on the spot and called for backup from the police station.

Before the police vehicle arrived, the officers demanded a bribe of 5,000 THB each from us. However, we barely had 500 THB in total between our pockets and our homes. We called other asylum seeker neighbors and managed to collect 10,000 THB, which we gave to the police to secure our release and return home.

April 20, 2017: We had been living in our current apartment for two years. Early this morning, our landlord informed us that the previous evening, immigration police had come to collect data on illegal immigrants living in the apartment. Upon hearing this, Nazia and I decided to move out immediately to avoid any risk. By that evening, we had found a new location and relocated.

May 11, 2018: Today, I was working with other asylum seekers in the Samae Dam area of Bangkok, loading and unloading tires from a truck. We were eight people loading used tires onto the truck when suddenly immigration police arrived. They handcuffed all eight of us and put us in their police vehicle to take us to a detention center. Fortunately, after a few hours, the Thai wife of our supervisor negotiated with the police under the table and managed to secure our release before we were taken to the detention center.

December 19, 2019: It was a Thursday morning, and like every year, during this year's immigration crackdown, the police broke down our door and arrested us. During this crackdown, apart from us, eight other families from our apartment were also arrested. Similar to the last time, the police first held us in custody at the Samrong Police Station. The next day, Friday, we were taken to court for an appearance. However, once again, after waiting the entire day in court, the police brought us back to Samrong Police Station. After the weekend passed, the police took us back to court on Monday to

present us before the judge. We paid an overstay fine of 4,000 THB each and were then taken back to Samrong Police Station.

December 24, 2019: After keeping us at Samrong Police Station for another night, the police moved us to the IDC (Immigration Detention Center) on Tuesday.

When we were brought to the IDC, the immigration police first collected our original passports, took our biometrics, and made us sign some documents. I was then placed in the male prison, where a 20 x 60-foot room was crammed with over 160 people – a space that wasn't even enough to accommodate 60 people.

Nazia, Anoosh, and Shanaya were moved to the children's detention center in Don Mueang. Anoosh was placed in a separate cell with other underage boys in the same building, and just like that, our family was split into pieces. There, my children and Nazia weren't even provided basic necessities like beds, pillows, or blankets.

March 4, 2020: After enduring 2 months and 17 days of confinement, Nazia, Anoosh, and Shanaya were finally released. The days leading up to their freedom were filled with anguish, as my children and Nazia were deprived of even the most basic necessities – no milk, no fruits, nothing to nourish their bodies or spirits. It was only through the tireless efforts of the Step-Up Foundation that they were granted a chance to breathe freely again. Yet, their release was bittersweet, as I remained trapped, separated from them, my heart aching for the family that had been torn apart.

January 28, 2021: Thirteen months and four days – that's how long I spent in a place where hope felt like a distant memory. For two agonizing months, I was cut off from my children, unable to hear their voices or reassure them that we would one day be whole again. The room I was confined in was a suffocating nightmare, crammed with far too many souls, each one struggling to survive. My health deteriorated under the weight of it all, my blood pressure soaring as the stress and despair took their toll.

Even now, after being granted bail, our family lives in a state of perpetual fear, knowing that any change in the law could strip away the little freedom we've regained. We live in a hope that somewhere, someone will see our struggle and extend a lifeline – a chance for us to resettle in a safe and welcoming country.

We humbly ask for your compassion and support, for a chance to find stability, safety, and peace for our family. Please, help us turn this hope into reality.

With heartfelt gratitude,
Abid James