

Back in 1994, in a cold winter morning in the mountains, a teacher in the classroom asked the students about their ambitions in life. The entire class got excited because they were all in just standard 6 and really eager to tell the class teacher about their ambitions and aspiration in life. Majority wanted to become Doctors, Engineers, Businessmen and Teachers, but a boy in the class, known for all the wrong reasons in the school, said he wants to become a Director. On hearing this the teacher asked the obvious question 'director of what'? The boy said HINDI FLIMS. Mind you here, this is not a typo. He used to pronounce films and flims till his master's degree. This boy was known for his notorious activities in school, so the classroom burst into laughter, thinking he might be joking. And how would the teacher react to this? Or how would anyone from his hometown react to this? His hometown was Kalimpong, which is 2500 kms away from Movie making industry of Mumbai. The language spoken in his hometown was Nepali and there was no previous example of anyone from his hometown going to Mumbai and becoming a movie Director. So obviously everyone thought he is a fool but this fool did not know it was impossible, so he did it. Flash forward 25 years and this boy becomes a bonafide Hindi Film director and releases his debut Hindi Movie – *Gone Kesh*.

Hi, my name is Qasim Kallow and I am that boy from the classroom who wanted to become a Filmmaker and I eventually became one.

But bring down the curtains yet!! For that's not the whole story. I tried to think out of the box but soon realized that thinking out of the box was not sufficient enough, specially when the box itself was inside a deep well. So I went on a journey to come out of that well. But it is said that no man is an island and no story exist in a vacuum so is my story filled with people, places and time.

Speaking of time, lets go back to the very beginning. Right where my story begins.

My story as a filmmaker would be incomplete without adding the story of my mother as I subconsciously acquired my taste of music and cinema from her.

My mother, Salima Kallow, was born in then free Tibet in 1948. She spent her childhood with her friends in the busy neighborhood of the market. But what is important here is that there was a cinema hall near her house that used to play Hindi movies. One such movie she remembers is Raj Kapoor's *Barsaat*. Offcourse she did not get to see the movie but the songs of that movie were a super hit. Songs like *hawame inudtajaaye* were hit songs and she as a child used to hum a tune or so. That's the first germ of Hindi music that hit my mother at an early age. And as time went by she became a regular listener of Hindi music.

In 1961 My Mother along with other family members, migrated to India from Tibet. She was 13 years old then and they all settled in Kalimpong. One fine day, after her Urdu and Arabic classes from the local *maulvi* in Kalimpong, she and her group of friends went to watch a movie in Kalimpong's *Kanchan Cinema Hall*. The movie was Shammi Kapoor's *Junglee* and it was apparently her first ever Hindi movie. She developed a liking for Hindi Movies too.

A leap of many many years and I was born in this beautiful quiet town of Kalimpong. But not all was well in the family. Fate has a way of messing the most intricate of plans and the sweetest of dreams. I lost my father when I was very very young and I don't even have a single and slightest memory of my father. The family's economic condition was bad and due to such condition I was sent to school a bit late in life. My mother opened a small shop in the neighborhood to get the family going and we as a family of 5 members lived in one small room with a makeshift kitchen in one of the corners of the room.

I grew up in that noisy quarrelsome neighborhood. I have seen drunken men fighting on the streets almost everyday. Pigs used to roam around on the streets and shit freely where

ever they wanted. Drug addicts used go about their nefarious activities just around the corner of my house. These were very normal sights for me as a kid. My childhood friends included a Bihari boy who was the son of a pan shop owner. Another was the son of a barber. Another was son of a vegetable seller and so on and so forth. And life was stuck around the 100 meters' radius of that vicinity. So I grew up with a very shallow and regressive mindset without a world view. This was my reality and for a long time I wanted to escape this reality. But on the other side when all of these were happening I was subconsciously introduced to old Hindi songs by my mother at a very early age. I slowly developed a liking for songs and eventually movies.

And one fine day my mother took me to watch a movie in the Kanchan Cinema hall. The movie was Shahrukh Khan's Deewana. I was 10 years old then. I was blown over by the song and dance extravaganza of the movie. The world shown in the movie was completely opposite to the world I was living. My neighborhood had 5 video parlors. I started watching a lot of movies in these shady video parlors. From an outsiders perspective everything was bad about these video parlors but a young boy slowly found his escape from his own reality. Through cinema I went into a world I had never seen before. I saw big, well painted houses, broad clean roads, colorful clothes, beautiful people doing great songs and dances. Everything looked nice and beautiful and slowly my regressive mind set started to change and I started seeing the glass considerably closer to half full. Time has a tendency to put things in perspective and so by the time I gave my boards exams I already had my own celluloid dream.

Dreaming of something is such a nice thing but chasing that dream is another thing.

After school I went on to do sociology honors from St Xavier's College, Calcutta. This was my first big experience living a city life. After completing my bachelor's degree, I did my masters in Cinema from Noida. Till this date I was only exposed to Hindi and Hollywood films but at the film school I was introduced to lot of international Cinema from all across the globe. Surprise as anyone would get but these international films gave me a world view which I desperately lacked. It taught me about Human behavior, it taught me about life, it taught me about different personalities, gave me a sense of geography, gave me a lesson on history etc etc. After two years of studying Film language and Cinema from across the globe, I finally decided it's about time to head towards *Mayanagri*— The city of dreams – Bombay.

On a rainy day in July, I gathered all my scattered impulses into an act of courage and left my Delhi house with a small bag and headed towards *Nizamuddin* station to catch a train to Bombay. I left behind a huge bag in my Delhi house. The bag had all my egos, my temper, my evilness, my greed etc. Finally, at 4 PM the train moved and I was making my journey to a city I had never been before, a city where I don't even have an accommodation and a city where I knew no one. But I knew one thing for sure and I was proud of it; I was finally chasing my dream.

I don't know how many kilos I lost during my initial days in Bombay but I became very thin. After staying in a dormitory for couple of days, I finally managed to get a room for myself. A room which I shared with another 5 boys. With my filmmaking craft in one pocket and my passion for Cinema in another pocket, I started doing the rounds of offices and Studios. Days became weeks and weeks became months but never did I hear back from any studio or office. By the end of my 4th month in Bombay, I knew the bus and train routes by heart. It became difficult to find the light at the other end of the tunnel.

But one fine day a buried hope rose from a sepulchre. I got my first break in the TV Industry. While doing the usual rounds of studios during my struggle days, I stumbled upon a

bungalow which was used for shootings in the Bombay Versova area. Call it luck but they hired me as an Assistant director right at the spot. I was hired as an intern and was paid Rs 100 a day for travelling and free food on the set. I accepted the job with open arms. I used to live close by, so I walked my way to the shoot and saved that 100 Rupees every day. And very smoothly I made my way from TV serials to Films and since then there was no looking back.

After working in 5 feature films with big A – list actors, I climbed the ladder a bit and joined Yashraj Films. I worked with Yashraj Films for almost 7 years before I went Independent and made my own film.

Directing my first film was surreal. I still remember the first day of shoot. I called for the first shot and in a very cinematic way everything came in front of my eyes; All those years of nurturing my dream, all those years of practising the thanks giving speech for an award ceremony in my bathroom, all those years of watching movies, all those years of struggle. It was truly an emotional moment. That film is special not just because its my debut movie but it also made me the first Tibetan Muslim to direct a full length feature film. I would trade all my tomorrows for that single yesterday.

Before I end my story, I would quickly like to add something here. While growing up I could not learn Tibetan properly, due to unavoidable circumstances, though I understand every bit of it but cannot speak properly. Because of this I missed out on lot of things in the community, specially interacting with the elders from the community and that sometimes came across as being rude. So I would humbly request everyone to teach their kids Tibetan Language. Specially when they are growing up or atleast speak with them in Tibetan at home. The kid will learn other languages from school or from their peer groups but the mother tongue will always be learnt from home. Language is not just a mode of communication but it is also a very important vehicle to carry the culture forward.