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TIM WIGMORE, *THE TELEGRAPH* AND AUTHOR OF THE MULTIPLE AWARD-WINNING *CRICKET 2.0*



UNVEILING JAZBAA

A HISTORY OF PAKISTAN WOMEN'S CRICKET

AAYUSH PUTHRAN



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PUBLISHING

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‘Profound, poignant and important – this was a story that had to be told’

LAWRENCE BOOTH, *WISDEN*

‘A history of women’s cricket in Pakistan is not only long overdue, it is a
grand story in its own right. It is a tale of bravery and audacity, and of
giant personalities who simply refused to maintain the status quo. This is an
essential work’

OSMAN SAMI UDDIN, AUTHOR OF *THE UNQUIET ONES: A HISTORY OF
PAKISTAN CRICKET*

‘Aayush Puthran movingly and eloquently tells the stories of the Pakistani
women who have had to fight to play the sport they love, in the face of
extraordinary societal challenges. Read it, weep for the lost opportunities
and share in hope for the future’

RAF NICHOLSON, JOURNALIST AND WOMEN’S CRICKET HISTORIAN

‘A forensically researched history covering the rollercoaster ride of the
Pakistan women striving to embrace the game they love against all the
odds. From the doom and gloom of the religious fundamentalism of the
1990s to the administration wrangles of the 21st century, *Unveiling Jazbaa*
perfectly captures the shining stars of their plight. A story that must be
told’

ISABELLE DUNCAN, FORMER MCC CRICKETER AND AUTHOR OF *SKIRTING
THE BOUNDARY: A HISTORY OF WOMEN’S CRICKET*

‘A remarkable story, told with empathy and respect, *Unveiling Jazbaa*
serves as a celebration of Pakistan women’s cricket – of personal journeys

as well as those of the collective, in the context of society and politics,
without hiding the warts, the stumbling blocks and the petty jealousies’
KARUNYA KESHAV, JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR OF *THE FIRE BURNS BLUE: A
HISTORY OF WOMEN’S CRICKET IN INDIA*

‘A fascinating re-telling of the highs and lows of Pakistani women’s cricket.
A must-read for any lovers of the sport’
AATIF NAWAZ, BBC TMS CRICKET COMMENTATOR

‘What a fantastic insight into the previously uncharted world of women’s
sport in Pakistan. Aayush has married expressive detail with an engaging
storytelling approach to produce this powerful and compelling read . . . For
the past 25 years, I have struggled to explain what playing cricket is like for
the women of Pakistan. In this book, Aayush not only brings to life the on-
field drama of the game but more importantly, he tells the stories of the
courage, resilience and drive of the remarkable women who wanted so
much to play cricket for their country. A comprehensive and compelling
account of the indomitable sisters who would not give up their dreams in
the face of political and cultural resistance, personal threats and
hardships, carried through to the teams of today who stand on their
shoulders and continue their vision. It was a privilege to be there at the
start’

JODIE DAVIS, WOMEN’S NATIONAL COACH – FIRST PAKISTAN WORLD CUP
TEAM, 1997

‘From running an obstacle race to worldwide recognition, Aayush traverses
a difficult ground in charting the journey. The story of Pakistan women’s
cricket comes wrapped in a labour of love, from India’
AFIA SALAM, PAKISTAN’S FIRST FEMALE CRICKET JOURNALIST

‘While the history of men’s cricket has long been documented, stories of
the women’s game, especially in the subcontinent, are only starting to be
unearthed and examined and this is an important contribution to the
archive. Aayush Puthran does an exceptional job of juxtaposing the socio-
political situation in Pakistan with the development of women’s cricket. He

treats the game with the seriousness it deserves, while not losing a
lightness of touch'

FIRDOSE MOONDA, ESPNCRICINFO

'A fascinating collection of incidents and experiences of these women –
full of striking events. An in-depth discovery and revelation of the history of
Pakistani female cricketers and of the sport in a country where women's
sports have just started taking shape . . . hooked on to it from the word go.

A must read!'

EBBA QURESHI, FOUNDER FEMGAMES

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To my family

Jazbaa

Definition: spirit, feeling, passion, desire, sentiment, emotion

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The 1997 World Cup team.

Back row: Kiran Baluch, Kiran Aitezaz, Asma Farzand, Saeed, Nazia Sadiq, Farah Deeba, Shazia Hassan.

Middle row: Jodie Davis, Shaiza Khan, Nazia Nazir.

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One of the many letters written by Shaiza Khan to Jodie Davis before the Australian could fly down to Pakistan to coach the team. *Jodie Davis*

Jodie Davis giving catching practice to a few girls aged 11 to 14 in a private school near Lahore. Such events were often organised by Shaiza to spread the word about women's cricket. *Jodie Davis*

The cricket ground developed at Saeed Khan's carpet factory by Aziz Saheb, the curator of the National Stadium in Karachi. *PWCCA*

The Kookaburra cricket balls used by PWCCA. They had to be specially manufactured as the required size wasn't available in Pakistan at the time. *Jodie Davis*

Practice facility at Shaiza and Sharmeen's house in Karachi. *Jodie Davis*

The Lahore Garrison grounds were available to the PWCCA players for practice after 2:30 p.m. every day. The gates were manned to keep the players safe. However, in the absence of nets, most of the training was limited to basic skills like catching, batting and fielding. *Jodie Davis*

Shaiza Khan during a team meeting ahead of the first-ever match played by the MCC women's team. *PWCCA*

Shaiza Khan walking out to open the innings for MCC in their first-ever match after membership was opened for women after 212 years. *PWCCA*

Shaiza Khan, Sharmeen Khan and Kiran Baluch – the three players instrumental in running the affairs of PWCCA – with John Major at Lords. *PWCCA*

Ahead of Asia Cup 2006 – Pakistan’s first international series under Urooj Mumtaz’s captaincy. *Back row:* Sana Javed, Sabahat Rasheed, Shumaila Mushtaq, Nain Abidi, Maryam Butt, Khursheed Jabeen, Bismah Maroof, Sajida Shah. *Middle row:* Umar Rasheed, Asmavia Iqbal, Tasqeen Qadeer, Qanita Jalil, Batool Fatima, Sana Mir, Mohammed Tariq Siddiqui. *Front row:* Shahnaz Sohail, Shamsa Hashmi, Imtiaz Ahmed, Naseem Ashraf, Urooj Mumtaz, Javed Zaman, Nadia Compton. *PCB*

Bushra Aitzaz, like many other protesters in Lahore in February 1983, was roughed up, teargassed and arrested during a protest organised by the Women’s Action Forum against the rule of Zia ul Haq. Almost three decades later, Bushra went on to become the general manager of PCB’s women’s wing. *Azhar Jafri/BBC*

Domestic cricket prospered with departments entering the system. In 2012, six teams participated in the inaugural edition of the Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto Women’s Cricket Championship. In 2019, the departments left the system and the domestic structure was shrunk to only three teams. *PCB*

Qanita Jalil getting awarded Player of the Match in a triangular domestic tournament. Prize money, which was as little as PKR 2,000 (around £8.50) in 2012, went up 10 times in the next 10 years. *PCB*

ZTBL was a powerhouse in domestic cricket, being able to acquire the services of some of the best players in the country. They won the inaugural edition of the Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto Women’s Cricket Championship among many other tournaments during their brief involvement in domestic cricket. *PCB*

Pakistani players celebrate after beating Bangladesh in the final of the 2010 Asian Games to win the gold medal. *Getty Images*

Pakistani players were showered with flowers and garlands at Karachi Airport on their return from the 2010 Asian Games. *Getty Images*

Pakistan’s cricket took an upswing during the tenure of Sana Mir and Mohtashim Rashid. *Mahwash Rahman/Women in Green and Beyond*

The integral members of Pakistan cricket’s journey (*from left to right*): Sidra Ameen, Iram Javed, Aiman Anwar, Sidra Nawaz, Nain Abidi, Nahida Khan and Anam Amin. *PCB*

A few record-holders for Pakistan in one picture. *From left to right:* Nain Abidi, Javeria Khan and Batool Fatima, along with left-arm pacer Masooma Junaid. *Mahwash Rahman/Women in Green and Beyond*

Sana Mir and Asmavia Iqbal were the pillars of Pakistan’s bowling attack, retiring as the team’s most successful spinner and pacer respectively. *PCB*

Mohtashim Rashid giving a word of advice after a wicketkeeping session with Rabiya Shah. *PCB*

The batters' conference: past, present and future. *From left to right: Nain Abidi, Bismah Maroof, Muneeba Ali, Javeria Khan, Nida Dar, Omaima Sohail. Mahwash Rahman/Women in Green and Beyond*

Players run to hug Nida Dar, who bowled the crucial last-over in the thrilling final of the 2014 Asian Games to help Pakistan clinch another medal. *Getty Images*

The players thank the crowd for their support after their win over Bangladesh in 2015. It was the first time they got a chance to play an international match in front of a home crowd since 2005. *PCB*

Bismah Maroof introducing the team to Najam Sethi in 2017, soon after she became the ODI captain and Sethi was re-elected as PCB's chair. In the background, the pranksters of the team – Javeria Khan and Nida Dar – can be seen sharing a joke. *PCB*

Training drills, fitness regimes and results changed drastically during the reign of Mark Coles (*sitting, fourth from left*), Andy Richards (*sitting, extreme left*) and Gemaal Hussain (*standing, extreme left*). *PCB*

A tradition within the team has been to start off training sessions or match days with a prayer. *PCB*

David Hemp took over the reins of women's cricket at an uncertain time. With the COVID-19 pandemic raging, cricket training and matches were massively affected. *PCB*

After her performances in 2021, Fatima Sana became the first Pakistani to be awarded the ICC Emerging Cricketer of the Year. *Ahsan Nagi/PCB*

Players from the Pakistan national team visited Peace School and College in the conservative city of Abbottabad as part of PCB's Skills2Shine programme designed to interact with young girls and introduce them to the game. *PCB*

The Class of '21. *Back row: Ayesha Naseem, Sadia Iqbal, Ayesha Zafar, Aliya Riaz. Middle row: Aiman Anwar, Syeda Aroob Shah, Fatima Sana, Nahida Khan, Omaima Sohail, Diana Baig. Front row: Anam Amin, Sidra Nawaz, Nida Dar, Javeria Khan, Kainat Imtiaz, Muneeba Ali, Nashra Sandhu. Mohammad Arbaz/PCB*

Bismah Maroof with her daughter, Fatima. In 2022, Bismah became the first Pakistani cricketer to return to play international cricket after childbirth. *Ahsan Nagi/PCB*

ABBREVIATIONS

* Not Out

BBC British Broadcasting Corporation

BCCI Board of Control for Cricket in India

BCCP Board of Control for Cricket in Pakistan

DLS Duckworth–Lewis–Stern method

ICC International Cricket Council

INR Indian rupees (currency)

IWCC International Women's Cricket Council

lbw leg before wicket

MCC Marylebone Cricket Club

MMA Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal

OCA Olympic Council of Asia

ODI One Day International

PCB Pakistan Cricket Board

PIA Pakistan International Airlines

PKR Pakistani rupees (currency)

PML(N) Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)

PML(Q) Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-i-Azam)

PWCA Pakistan Women's Cricket Association

PWCCA Pakistan Women's Cricket Control Association

T20 Twenty20 cricket

T20I Twenty20 International

UAE United Arab Emirates

WBBL Women's Big Bash League

ZTBL Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited

AUTHOR'S NOTE

❖ The Pakistan women's team played its first-ever international match on 28 January 1997. This book primarily documents their first 25-year journey in international cricket. As a result, all stories, statistics and photos (except that of Bismah Maroof with her daughter, Fatima) in this book only go to 27 January 2022.

❖ Since the documented history of Pakistan women's cricket has been limited, the story has had to rely heavily on oral testimony. Almost all incidents mentioned in the book, except those involving the personal stories of the lives of the cricketers, have been confirmed by multiple individuals before being included. In cases where there are alternate views, all positions regarding those specific incidents have been placed on record or not taken into consideration. All views on the social, political and cricketing state of Pakistan are based on the interviews conducted and on documented evidence.

❖ Ayesha Ashar, Bushra Aitzaz, Najam Sethi, Nazia Nazir, Sabih Azhar, Sajjida Shah, Qanita Jalil, Urooj Mumtaz and Wasim Khan were approached for this input but were unavailable for comment. As a result, any mention of them either does not include their version of events or has been taken from secondary sources (quotes and interviews with various news publications, interviews with other individuals, etc.).

❖ Shahryar Khan was also approached, but on the advice of his wife, Minoo Khan, the version of events during his tenure as PCB chair was taken from Shamsa Hashmi. Ali Khan, Shahryar's son, was also interviewed for this book.

❖ asiancricket.org, cricbuzz.com, cricketarchive.com, espncricinfo.com and pcb.com.pk have been referred to for scorecards.

❖ There have been multiple instances of conflict between the records and the version of events from the players. For example: Nain Abidi has been credited for picking up the wicket of Britney Cooper in the third T20I against the West Indies in Providence in 2011. However, she claims she has never taken an international wicket. Similarly, Sania Khan has been credited as captain in two matches (against Ireland and South Africa) at the 2010 ICC Women's T20 Cricket Challenge. However, a number of players who were part of the team claim that Sana Mir walked out to do the toss and led the team in those games before adding that Sania has never led Pakistan. Even Sadia Butt has been noted as the captain instead of Shaiza Khan in the 2003 IWCC Trophy match against Scotland. In such cases, where there are undisputed claims by multiple players which do not reflect in the scorecard accordingly, the players' versions have been taken into account considering scope for data entry errors.

❖ In various records and write-ups, the name of the player's father has replaced their surname. For example, Javeria Khan has been referred to as Javeria Wadood, Nida Dar as Nida Rashid, etc. The English spellings have also undergone some changes. For example, Ayesha Ashar and Ayesha Ashhar, Mohtashim Rashid as Mauhtashim Rasheed, etc. have been used interchangeably.

FOREWORD

The story of professional women's cricket in Pakistan opens with a scene that could easily come from fiction: 11 years of dictatorship have ended, a 35-year old woman, Benazir Bhutto, has been elected to power, and a teenaged girl decides that if a nation is ready for a woman Prime Minister it's also ready for a women's cricket team. From there the story spirals into death threats, a stadium filled with spectators who are all on-duty police personnel, and a father who tells his daughter to leave the country and do her cricket-playing in England. At the very centre of this story is the determination and love of the game of the teenaged girl, Shaiza Khan, who goes on to become the founder and captain of the first Pakistan women's cricket team, supported in everything by her sister and teammate Sharmeen, and her vice-captain, the record-breaking (and, to date, record-holding) Test batter, Kiran Baloch. Along the way there are political intrigues, trouble with the board, off-field rivalry with other women, fears of conspiracy within the team. . . there is also a great deal of cricket.

Part of the pleasure of *Unveiling Jazbaa* is its determination to keep cricket at the centre of things — as every Pakistani player from Shaiza to Sana Mir and onward would doubtless want. Aayush Puthran introduces us to many of the extraordinary women who've played for Pakistan, but he does so while weaving their stories through those of cricket series and tournaments — we witness a team that starts off with some players who've never played cricket before turn into a professional unit that learns what winning feels like. There is drama both on field, and off. Many of the problems and intrigues will feel familiar to anyone who follows the men's game (shifts in form, cliques within the team, captaincy crises, Indo-Pak politics disrupting cross-border tournaments), others are particular to the women's game (players whose family members don't want

them to play for reasons of honour, pressure to quit the game for marriage and motherhood, a board that isn't interested in supporting the team).

'What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?' C L R James asked. While reading this book you might well ask yourself the question: 'What do they know of cricket who only men's cricket know?'

Kamila Shamsie

INTRODUCTION

FOR A DESIRE as frivolous as wanting to play cricket, Saba Nazir, a 17-year-old from Muridke, decided to commit a 'crime greater than murder' in 2009.

She cut her hair.

The locks on her head represented her family's honour in their small, conservative hometown of Muridke, located less than 50 kilometres from Lahore, the cultural capital of Pakistan. By cutting her hair, Saba defied tradition and put her family's dignity at stake in a place that was a breeding ground for fanatical Islam. Saba, though, was willing to bear the repercussions of her act – two slaps and a thrashing with a shoe. It was her ultimate declaration of love for the game.

Hailing from the conservative Rajput caste, the women of the Nazir house had to observe *purdah* (the wearing of a veil). They weren't allowed to step out of their homes without a male relative accompanying them, and education was limited until the tenth grade, after which it was anticipated that they would get married.

It was a tradition that Saba was expected to follow. But as an 11-year-old, she had watched women in action in the armed forces on the state-run PTV channel; this first exposure to women stepping out of their homes and working amused her. Then she came across a local magazine which had pictures of girls playing sports at Queen Mary College in Lahore. It was a concept which had never occurred to her before. It triggered in her a desire to see the world outside the four walls of her house and a drive to create a sense of identity independent of her family. 'I didn't want to be like the women in my house, who would spend their lives looking after children. I wanted to go to a university.'

When a society's central goal for young girls is to make them marriage-worthy, 'excessive' education is detrimental to those prospects. Even though

academia didn't interest Saba, she realised that further education offered her an escape from forced early marriage and she convinced her father to let her study for a couple more years. It was her first step towards emancipation.

The act of playing sports was also seen as unwomanly, and cricket – popularly known as 'the gentleman's game' – even more so. Saba utilised the break periods between college lectures to run around and play cricket, something she wasn't allowed to do at home, where she could only secretly watch her brothers play the game with other boys in the neighbourhood.

Saba reserved her run and shadow-bowl practice for the afternoons when the scorching sun stopped anyone else from coming to the rooftop and she was free to behave in a way that many believed didn't befit a girl. Playing was an escape from her mundane life. 'But then again, when I went back home every evening, I felt suffocated. There was no freedom.'

A four-day, annual, inter-collegiate event in Sheikhpura, a town nearly an hour away from Muridke, offered an opportunity to escape that suppression. Without telling anyone in her family, she sneaked off to Sheikhpura. Surrounded by other girls who were free to run around and play all sorts of different sports, she was almost overwhelmed by the experience of this more liberated world. 'I wished I'd been born in Sheikhpura so that I could also get to play like those girls.'

She participated in a few sprints and badminton competitions, but the joy wasn't to last long. On the final day she returned home late – at 6.00 p.m. – and was caught by her mother. For the first time, she had to share her long-kept secret and confide that she had been playing sports. 'Ammi [Mother] scolded me and warned that my brother would cancel my admission to college if he found out about it. But I was happy that I got a chance to play. For me, it was a risk worth taking.'

It was in Sheikhpura, a year later, that she eventually got the opportunity to bowl in front of the selectors from the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) in an inter-division tournament trials. Saba's bowling impressed them, and she was chosen to play in the game the next morning.

But the selection landed her in a quandary because she would have to make her own arrangements for the journey to Sheikhpura rather than travelling with the rest of her university classmates. Not only was her family too poor to afford the extra expenses but she couldn't even let them know she was playing. Moreover, that evening after the selection trials, she returned home late again,

leaving her mother furious. 'Ammi banned me from playing cricket again. I cried a lot that day.'

The next day, she quietly escaped to the neighbouring town. With help from her school coach, she worked out a travel route and boarded a bus from Muridke to Batti Chowk, then took a rickshaw to the ground. It was a journey laden with fear. 'I was scared of losing my way. And to compound that was the fear of my brothers or someone from the neighbourhood spotting me boarding a bus by myself. If anybody at my house had found out, *mein nahi bachti* [I wouldn't have survived].'

No one spotted her, but she lost her way a little and was late for the match. It didn't matter. 'When I wore the kit and entered the ground it felt unreal. Even in my dreams, I hadn't imagined that I would actually be able to play cricket.'

Nothing perturbed her that day. Not even the fact that the opposition were tearing them apart. The only exception was when the umpire claimed that she wasn't a fast bowler. The assessment hit her hard. 'I argued that I *was* a fast bowler but, at that time, I didn't know any other type of bowling.'

In fact, she barely knew anything about cricket at all, except swinging the bat and rolling her arms over. Yet, her performance that day earned praise, and the recognition kept her going.

But it wasn't a straight path ahead. Well aware that going home would mean the end of her cricketing ambitions, she pleaded with the coach to help her escape and provide accommodation. Her request was declined, and she had to return home dejected.

However, she did get to keep the jersey she had worn while playing, which had the PCB logo embossed on it. Even though she had no clue what that logo signified when she was flaunting it around in college, her friend's brother noticed it. Impressed by what she had achieved, he suggested she try her luck at Country Club – a gymkhana in Muridke where his grandfather worked as a groundsman.

The club was only three kilometres from where Saba lived, but it was in a secluded region. It wasn't considered safe enough for a girl to travel there alone, and her family's financial constraints didn't make it any easier. Her father, who owned a small provisions store, could barely make ends meet. Her brother, the only other earning member of the family, worked as a labourer in a footwear factory. Saba courageously urged her mother, who was averse to the idea, to

come along with her. 'I told her that I just wanted to check if there were any rewards for playing cricket.'

The trip proved to be disastrous. Having spent a valuable portion of their savings on public transport, they were denied entry by the guard, humiliated and told to leave. The whole experience infuriated her mother. 'To appease her, I did all the domestic chores that night: cooked dinner and washed all the dishes.'

But Saba didn't give up on the opportunity. A few days later, on the holy day of Friday, she requested her mother to come again with her to Country Club, offering to pay the transport fare from her own savings. This time, she carried the jersey with the PCB logo, and it was enough to persuade the guard that she was a cricketer.

The coach, Waqar Sarfaraz, who was training a bunch of boys at the club, was also impressed by the jersey. He took her to the nets and asked her to bowl. Wrapping the *dupatta* (traditional shawl) around her waist, she rolled her arms over. Her bowling impressed the coach enough for him to suggest to her mother that she should let Saba train under him. The most impactful of his promises was that, if she excelled, there was potential for significant financial reward. The coach also offered to pick her up and drop her off from training to ensure her safety.

'Ammi was hesitant. She was convinced that Abu [Father] and Bhai [Brother] wouldn't approve.' But despite her initial hesitation, her mother eventually agreed.

'I was so thrilled I couldn't sleep that night.'

The next day, Saba turned up four hours early for the practice session and went out running in the open field, the hot sun beating down. She had been given an opportunity and she was going to make the most of every second of it – even though it remained a close secret between the two women of the house.

In order to keep her safe from outsiders and her family members, one of her teammates would always drop her back in the middle of a crowded market on their scooter, and from there she would walk back home. That arrangement, though, didn't last very long.

A few months later, her coach left the job at Country Club and resumed his training at a local ground, which was close to the factory where Saba's brother worked. 'Whenever the factory workers left for home, I would hide behind the nets.' What she couldn't avoid, though, was the gaze of male

strangers who would flock from neighbouring villages to witness the rare sight of a girl playing cricket.

It made Saba uncomfortable, and she would often hide behind a tree. The coach noticed her unease, but within the societal limitations they were dealing with in getting her to play, he only had one piece of stern advice to offer: 'With this attitude, you will never grow. Accept it and play.'

Her mother, meanwhile, wasn't fully convinced by the arrangement, living partly in fear of her husband and son finding out about what Saba was doing. She was happiest when it rained and training sessions were cancelled.

Saba had been given a free hand by her mother because they lived under the false assumption that if she played for a few months, she would be ready to represent the national team. The realisation that a lot more time and hard work would be required prompted her mother to stop giving Saba the transport fare. 'I told the coach that my mother would rather have me sick than play cricket.'

One of the boys at the academy bailed her out briefly by paying for her travel to Lahore's Kinnaird College, where she would play competitive matches. After a while, she realised that arrangement was becoming a burden on him and, as a way out, a teacher at the college suggested that she could take a bus which ferried students free of charge.

As instructed, she took the bus the next day but was asked to get off at the next stop as the conductor said that the service was only for boys. 'I felt so sad and lonely, I wanted to cry. I didn't go for the match that day and returned to my teacher, asking him for some advice. He suggested that I get a haircut. I told him that, in my house, it would be a crime greater than murder; my family would beat me to a pulp.'

Despite knowing the fate that awaited her, Saba's yearning to play cricket had overcome the threat – not just of physical assault, but the possibility of her secret escape routes being shut down. With all her PKR 150 (Pakistani rupees – the equivalent of 64p) saved up, she took her younger brother along with her as they searched out the most affordable haircut they could find in town. The barber, equally uncertain of her decision, would enquire after every snip of the scissors if it was short enough. Saba told her to keep going until it got so short that the barber eventually refused to go any further.

Saba wasn't particularly happy with the length – but it was short enough to leave her family both embarrassed and livid. Her father slapped her across the face and her elder brother grounded her. 'They said I'd brought disgrace to the

family. They cursed my mother for letting me get out of hand, and she stopped giving me food.'

It was a punishment that backfired for without food she became enraged rather than compliant. With an opportunity to play an inter-district match, she confronted her brother. 'You can kill me if you want,' she said flatly, 'but I'm not going to stop playing cricket. Even if you cut off my legs, I'll crawl to the ground and play.'

The following morning, with a cold fog shrouding the streets and with her life on the line, Saba left the house in defiance of their orders and climbed on to the rooftop of a bus crowded with men. 'When I sat on the bus, shivering in the cold, I was holding back tears, barely able to comprehend what I was doing.'

She continued to defy her family over the following weeks, but with money running low she had to try to sneak aboard the bus for free or else she wouldn't have had enough to buy herself any food. There was one occasion when she was caught by the bus conductor without a ticket. She refused to pay the fare and was slapped, threatened with the police and thrown off.

The humiliation and the fright were terrible, but the bus had taken her most of the way, and because she had refused to pay for the ticket, she could afford lunch – a naan dipped in water. At times that would suffice her for an entire day; on other days she would go to sleep hungry. 'Students in Kinnaird College were rich and it hurt to see them waste food. How is it that Allah has given some people so much that they can throw food in the bin, and not give me enough to even take the edge off my hunger?'

The match days were especially difficult because she wouldn't arrive home until 9.00 p.m. In an effort to avoid the attention of her parents, she had to quietly sneak in, helped by her younger brother, and pretend that she'd fallen asleep – but in doing so she had to skip dinner.

The poor eating patterns and the quality of water consumed eventually led to Saba falling sick with high fever. Taking her out to the doctor with shortened hair was too embarrassing for her family, so they forced her to rest at home without medical attention. Nearly a month of missed training sessions eventually got her coach curious, and he turned up at the house to check on her. He offered to pay for her medical treatment and took her to a doctor, where she was diagnosed with typhoid.

When she was better, Saba resumed training, and her iron-clad perseverance paid off when she was selected to play in the inaugural edition of

the Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto Women's Cricket Championship – a domestic competition organised by the PCB – a few months later. This selection changed the fortunes of her household.

Her photo appeared in a newspaper, and neighbours went to greet her family. It was the first time they realised that Saba playing cricket hadn't shamed them; it had, instead, brought them honour.

Their attitudes towards her and her passion shifted overnight. Not only did they allow her to play freely thereafter, but they even agreed to let her stay by herself in Lahore, making her the first woman in the family to be allowed to live an independent life.

Saba lived on campus at the University of Lahore, but had only a meagre PKR 300 to her name. It wasn't enough to survive. Living largely on a diet of porridge or chapati and pickle, she remained undernourished and couldn't afford medicines.

Furthermore, even though there were a number of year-round sports for girls at the university, cricket was only played for two weeks a year. To get further practice, she joined the Aleem Dar Cricket Academy, which was situated nearly ten kilometres from the campus. It was a long walk, but she didn't have enough money for transport. A few months later, however, having earned PKR 2,500 from playing inter-university games, she was able to buy a second-hand bicycle. She travelled 28 kilometres to pick up the bike and was thrilled to take ownership of it. It had the potential to transform her life – the only issue was that she didn't know how to ride it. She set off back to her hostel at the University of Lahore but struggled to maintain any sort of balance and eventually gave up and decided to walk. Finally, too exhausted to continue, she attempted to take a bus – but she wasn't allowed to take the bike on board. Rickshaws were asking for PKR 500, which she couldn't afford. So, she decided she had little option but to try to ride her bike again. The trip back from Nila Gumbad to her hostel was longer and more painful than she had ever expected; it took three hours and was punctuated by falls and numerous near accidents. But she made it.

It took her another week to eventually learn to ride the bike properly, but she hadn't fully appreciated the repercussions of her decision. Her coach had warned her that riding the bike to practice would be a silly decision but she believed, in the absence of any other option, that she could overcome the challenge. During the summer month of Ramadan, with poor nutrition, riding one and a half hours to and from training took a heavy toll on her body.