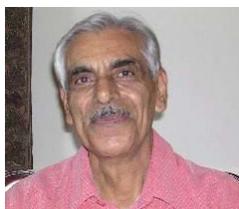


From Meghiana to Hoshiarpur, 1947



Pran Bhatla

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Editor's note: Mr. M. P. V. Shenoi has written this story, based on conversations with his friend, Pran Bhatla.

I was 11 years old only when India and Pakistan gained independence in 1947. I am not sure whether it was 14th August (Pakistan) or 15th August (India) because we were in West Punjab, which became a part of Pakistan, but moved soon after to India.

My parents and their four children - two brothers and two sisters – were in Meghiana in our ancestral bungalow. My father, R.K. Bhatla, was a Professor of Physics in Government College, Lyallpur (now Faisalabad), a commercial town about 140 km from Lahore. He was spending the summer vacations in Meghiana. My grandfather, Raisahib Bishan Das had retired as a Garrison Engineer in the Military Engineer Service in 1938. Since he was one of the few Indians who had risen to that rank, he was widely respected in Meghiana and official circles.

From around April 1947, our family was tense and worried about Independence and the Partition. Every day, we would listen to the evening news broadcast on the impressive Phillips radio my grandfather had installed in the hall. After the news, there would be an uneasy calm. Then, the elders would discuss in hushed tone the repercussions of the announcements. From their furrowed faces we children could guess that all was not well.

When the time came for government officials to choose between India and Pakistan, my father opted for India. But, we did not move to India before Independence Day.

As far as I remember, Meghiana was peaceful on 14 and 15th August, 1947. However, sporadic rioting broke out in the crowded part of the town, perhaps, in the third week of August. One of our relatives was the Branch Manager of the Imperial Bank (now State Bank of India). The bank was located in the prestigious Civil Lines area, had a large compound, and was an imposing structure. The Manager lived in a house behind the bank in the same compound.

We got a message from the Manager that we should leave our bungalow and come and stay with him, as he sensed that there was trouble brewing. The bank would be safe as it had armed guards. On his advice, we collected our lunch, which we were about to eat, and went to his bungalow. We took just a few of our belongings, entrusting the safekeeping of our home to our family servant. We thought we would return soon, after normalcy was restored.

As it dawned upon us that we had brought very little with us, we requested the Manager to arrange a police escort for us so that we could go home and bring some essential things. That evening, my father brought two small suit cases. That was the last time my father or any family member went to our bungalow.

Riots spread throughout the town. A couple of days later, the local police came to the bank premises, and took us to a refugee camp near the Railway station. My parents thought that most probably we

would be asked to go to India. The police asked all the ladies to hand over their ornaments, and my father had to give up his double barrel gun. On the way to the camp, the vehicle slowed down frequently, but after many anxious moments, we reached our destination. As he was leaving, one of the policemen who had escorted us to the camp told us that his colleagues had wanted to kill us on the way.

We stayed in the camp for two or three days. Then we were told to pack our things and be prepared to leave by the night train to Lahore. That night we took our belongings and settled in a train bogie – but it did not move out. Next day we were told to return to the camp. We learnt Razakars had looted and burnt many of the earlier trains, and several people had died. To be safe, the authorities had suspended travel by train. After a few days we were asked to board the train in the night. This time it did move, with Indian military and local police as escorts. It stopped for long durations at several places.

The journey to India via Lahore took three days, instead of the normal one day. I remember that the moment we reached the Indian soil in early morning. We were greeted by shouts of *Sat Sri Akal* and *Jai Hind*, to which we also responded enthusiastically. Hindu and Sikh volunteers gave us a hot meal of *dal* and *chapatti*. We were so famished that I still remember that meal and the gusto with which I ate it!

Then the train went onto Amritsar, where we all got down. My father went somewhere, came back after an hour or so, and said that we had to proceed to Jalandhar. We took a train to Jalandhar, but were asked to get down at Kartarpur, just a few kilometres from Jalandhar, perhaps because the Jalandhar railway station was overcrowded.

We went by a military truck from Kartarpur directly to the Muslim area of Jalandhar. Our family and another family were allotted a house left by a Muslim family that had gone over to Pakistan. The house was old, cramped, and smelly but we hardly had a choice. We unpacked our belongings and started settling down.

In the meanwhile, my father went alone to Hoshiarpur, where he had been appointed as a professor at the Government College. The Hoshiarpur District Magistrate allotted him a house vacated by a Muslim family. After getting the house cleaned and made habitable, he came to Jalandhar to pick us up. However, when we reached Hoshiarpur, we found that this house had been temporarily allocated to Muslims who were waiting safe passage to Pakistan. We had to stay in a makeshift place, sharing the accommodation.

After a week or so, the house was vacated and we moved in. We children started going to new schools, and slowly the family started developing a routine in the new place.

Even in the times of strife and hatred, there are instances of just and humane actions. Some time in early 1948, my father and two his colleagues, Professors Mehra and Chadda, found out that their household belongings in Lyallpur had been kept safe, and that they could come there to get it. Mr. J.L. Wilson, a European, was the Principal of Government College, Lyallpur. He had instructed the Vice-Principal, Professor Hashmat Khan, to gather the belongings of Hindu professors who had left, and store it in on the college campus. Now a message was sent through military channels that these belongings could be collected.

The three professors sought and got the help of the armed forces. They went to Lyallpur in military convoys. There they sorted out their luggage by candlelight in the night to avoid possible attacks by local Razakars. By the time only about three fourths of the military truck had been loaded with the belongings, it was suspected that the Razakars had got the scent, and the truck along with the three professors was driven away to a military camp. However, Professor Hashmat Khan gathered the remaining belongings, loaded them on a tonga, and sent the tonga to the same camp, escorted by two gun carrying students on bicycles!

The truck went from the camp to Lahore, and then on to Amritsar. Here our belongings were transferred to a civilian vehicle that drove to Hoshiarpur. My father made this four-day trip to Pakistan without telling anyone in the family – we found out what he had done only when he showed up with our belongings. We could not recover anything from our ancestral bungalow at Meghiana, even though my father wrote many letters to various officials.

Epilogue

The bond of respect and love between my father, a Hindu, and one of his Muslim students withstood the horrors of the Partition and the passage of time. My father knew well Abdul Salam, an exceptionally brilliant student of the Intermediate College in Meghiana. He was finding it difficult to get any aid to continue his college studies because he was an Ahmadiyya. (His being an Ahmadiyya continued to be a problem for him even in death – see excerpt from Wikipedia below). My father arranged a scholarship for him, and Abdul Salam became a good student of my father.

In 1979, when Professor Salam got the Noble Prize in Physics, my father wrote to him, congratulating him. Professor Salam responded as only a good student does. When he came to India to attend a conference, he came to our home to pay his respects to my father. When Guru Nanak University conferred an Honorary Doctorate on Professor Salam, he invited my father and another professor, called them to sit with him on the dais, and publicly acknowledged the love for Physics my father had created in him.❖

From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdus_Salam

Salam died at the age of 70 on [21st November](#) 1996 in [Oxford, England](#) after a long illness. His body was brought to Pakistan and was taken to the [Ahmadiyya Muslim Community](#) headquarters of the city of [Rabwah](#).^[8] His body was kept in [Darul Ziafat](#), where 13,000 men and women took a last glimpse of his face. Some 30,000 people attended the funeral prayers of the scientist.

Salam was buried without official protocol in the graveyard [Bahishti Maqbara](#) in Rabwah next to his parents' graves.^[8] The [epitaph](#) on his tomb initially read "*First Muslim Nobel Laureate*" but, because of Salam's adherence to the [Ahmadiyya Muslim](#) sect, the word "Muslim" was later erased on the orders of a local magistrate, leaving the [nonsensical](#) "*First Nobel Laureate*".^[9]

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