

From Kot Khan Pakistan to India 1947



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Editor's notes:

This is the second of several stories related to the life of the Bhatla family before and after the Partition of India in 1947. The first story [is available here](#).

[From Meghiana to Hoshiarpur, 1947 by Pran Bhatla](#) is an independent story of another family in a similar situation.

India and Pakistan got their Independence in August 1947. My parents and their four children – three sons and one daughter – were living in a village called Kot Khan in District Jhang in west Punjab. We were Hindus, and this area became a part of Muslim-dominated Pakistan.

Kot Khan village is located about 1.5 km from the left bank of river Jhelum, and about 20 km from Meghiana, which is the headquarters of Jhang district. It was a perfect setting for good living on account of clean air, good quality drinking water, and summer time date fruits to enjoy. The village had a population of around 500, of which about half were Hindus.

I was studying in Standard 6 in a Middle school at Kot Shakir on the right bank of river Jhelum, and living in the school's hostel. This area was peaceful until close to the time of Independence. After our summer vacation ended in July 1947, we received a message that schools will remain closed for some more time. We were told not to return to the school until further notice.

With Independence Day approaching fast, the peace scenario was changing too and there were all sorts of rumours. Peace in cities seemed more fragile, and there were reports of curfew imposed in Jhang and Meghiana. On August 13, 1947, a messenger arrived at Kot Khan with the news that Kot Khan would be looted and vandalized next day on Thursday August 14. There was no one to help us - we would have to take care of our lives. Our peace had been suddenly disturbed.

On hearing the news of the impending loot, there was panic among the Hindus. About 25 Bhatla families got together at *Shahn di Haveli*, a large house with a surrounding compound. They had their bags and baggage with them, and they were ready to fight back in defence with whatever resources they had. The only weapon we had was a 12-barrel gun, owned by Mr Basant Lal Bhatla, for which we had 26 bullets. In those days, few people had weapons, and this weapon was perhaps good enough for peacetime security.

The families spent the night together on rooftops with brickbats, some sticks, and kerosene kept ready for heating and use as defence against intruders. But the elder and wiser lot was thinking hard how to save lives, even if everything else had to be sacrificed.

In the early morning of August 14, our uncle Bahadur Chand Katyal, who lived in the nearby village Sajhowal, arrived with his family. He was an influential person who had friendly relations with the village's *numberdar* (senior officer) Hakim Khan and his brothers, Fateh Khan and Inayat Khan. Hakim Khan was well known for his wisdom and moderation in dealing with

people. The three Khan brothers owned more than 1,000 acres of land. Two other Khan brothers, Haji Khan and Ahmedyar Khan, also owned large amounts of land on the east side of the river. The Hindu families generally had small land holdings, and were mostly engaged in small business, apart from farming.

The Hindu and Muslim elders were closeted for two hours that early morning. Finally, a compromise emerged. The Hindu-owned 12-barrel gun was given to the Khans, who took the responsibility of assuring the safety of all Hindus. All Hindus were marched to the safety of the Khan compound at around 9:00 in the morning. Adult male Hindus members were taken to the local mosque for safety, where they briefly and symbolically converted to Islam. Fateh Khan was positioned on the top of their house with the gun to ward off any miscreants.

At about 10 am, Kot Khan village was attacked by a slogan-shouting mob of about 1,000 Muslims. Soon, all the shops and Hindu homes of the village were thoroughly looted. Even doors, windows and water hand pumps were removed, making the entire Hindu neighbourhoods unfit for living.

I could see from the roof top that crowds moving around with *lathis* (heavy sticks) and shouting for loot. Occasionally, someone from the crowd would *Salaam* (pay respect) to the Khan brother sitting on the rooftop with a gun. There was no loss of life or harm done to any of the village Hindus, as they were all sheltered by the Khan brothers in their compound.

By 6:00 pm, the mob had left with its loot, leaving the village in ruins. By 7:00 pm, all Bhatla families were quietly marched to the compound of Haji Khan, whose family was more compassionate towards Hindus. That night, Zulfikar Ali Khan, son of Ahmedyar Khan, escorted my father and uncle to our house to recover the gold ornaments they had buried earlier.

We remained in hiding in this Khan compound for 8 to 9 days. There were all sorts of stories circulating about what was happening in the nearby villages. The Hindus of this village will never forget the Khan families who kept them safe for so many days.

On August 24, Shadi Lal Katyal of village Chella, who had joined the Punjab Police as an Assistant Sub-Inspector, arrived with military trucks and some police force members. He told the Muslim numberdar of the evacuation plans for Hindus. The entire Hindu community was to be transferred to the Shah Jeewana Mandi Refugee camp. He had already arranged evacuation of his family and other Hindus of Chella village.

The Kot Khan Hindus reached the safety of refugee camp on August 25, 1947. The Shah Jeewana Mandi compound was full of refugees from the neighbouring areas. Many of them had been injured. Our stay of four days at the camp was very stressful, with danger of attack at nighttime. Nevertheless, some shops were still functional in the Mandi compound, where we could buy shoes, socks and other items of personal care.

On August 29, 1947, we boarded a train from Shah Jeewana and landed at Chiniot railway station, where we spent the night. We took another train to Lahore the next day. The train arrived at Chiniot on the morning of August 30. All our families boarded the train. The next stop was Chak Jhumra, where the entire train was jam packed by Hindu and Sikh families, with men, women, children and their luggage overflowing to the train's rooftop. The train was so packed that it was difficult to move. All the travellers were scared of their lives.

At around 4:00 pm, the train reached Shahdara, one stop short of Lahore. The train was detained at Shahdara for 8 to 9 hours, with no water to drink. Nobody was allowed to get down from the train and take water from the running water tap at the railway station. I remember having seen dead bodies by the pools of water on the opposite side of station. My older brother, at some risk

to his life, went to this pool of water to soak some cloth, and ran back to the train. We used this water to quench our thirst.

By midnight, we were at Lahore where plenty of water of was available. The passengers seemed to be relieved of the impending danger to their lives.

Early morning on August 31, 1947, we reached Attari station on the Indian side of the border. By 9:00 am, we saw that some planes were dropping some food packets. The boiled gram they dropped was distributed to the hungry refugees from Pakistan. At noontime, we were taken to the home of a Sikh family, where we were served dal, roti and *achaar* (pickle). I still remember eating this, after two days hunger and fear.

We were no longer afraid or hungry. Would we able to rebuild our lives in this new place? ❖

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