

## *Prosperity Returns – Partition Problems Overcome*



**R P Bhatla**

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*Editor's note: This is the last of four stories related to the life of the Bhatla family before and after the Partition of India in 1947. The first story, about life in pre-Partition Pakistan, [is available here](#). The story of the family's forced move from Pakistan to India is [available here](#). The third story, about the family's struggle to recover from Partition is [available here](#).*

I passed my matriculation examination in 1954 from K R S D B High School, Rae Kote. I stood first in school. The students were informed that some professors from Khalsa College Gurusar Sudhar would be visiting the school soon after the results were announced to meet students interested in higher education.

When the Khalsa College Gurusar Sudhar professors arrived, they told us about the facilities that the college could provide. They were trying to persuade the students to join the college. Our school headmaster, Mr Gurnam Singh, introduced me to the professors, and recommended that Khalsa College should extend all possible concessions to me. In those days, some rural colleges did not have enough students, and the college authorities were visiting schools to spread higher education in rural areas.

Narender Nath, one of my classmates and neighbours, also wanted to join college. His father was Des Raj Sharma, a famous Arithmetic teacher in our school. Des Raj wanted his son to do BA Mathematics and become a teacher. Des Raj was also persuading me to join college and become a teacher. He accompanied me to Ludhiana to help me buy a bicycle, and he also bought a bicycle for his son. The college at Gurusar Sudhar was 16 km from Rae Kote on the Rae Kote–Ludhiana district highway, and a bicycle was considered the right way to go to college and come back home daily. This seemed most cost effective too.

In the end, in June 1954, I was admitted to F. Sc. (Non-medical) Intermediate (*Editor's note: This degree was at a level lower than a B. Sc. degree*) course at Khalsa College Gurusar Sudhar. I had to pay nothing to attend but there was no scholarship from the College to cover other expenses.

Life at College was totally different from school days. Total freedom and no home work. The College had some reputed professors. Professor Kundan Singh was a well-known Mathematics teacher. Professor Sant Singh Sekhon, a famous Punjabi writer, taught English with a lot of style and flavour. He used to say, "I write one Punjabi story or fiction book every year, make some money by straightaway selling the book rights, and then spend all the money to seek election as MLA on the communist platform." He probably never won any election – but he was a great teacher, writer and academician. He did not believe in any family planning programme to control population, and would support large families to suit the parents' needs. He was highly appreciative of Pandit Nehru's style of writing, and exhorted us to read his *The Discovery of India* and *Glimpses of the World History*.

There were half yearly tests to check the progress of students, followed by a prize distribution ceremony for those who did well on the tests. In the first test, I got five prizes for standing first or second in all the four elective subjects, and in total marks. I got five books as prizes. My hard work was acknowledged and noticed.

The good students were asked to contribute articles to the College magazine. I became a regular visitor to the College library. There was also a library at Rae Kote Municipal committee office. I visited this library on holidays to read newspapers and to check advertisements for any jobs. I wrote an article on *Afro-Asian Bandung Conference in Indonesia – 1955*, which was accepted and published in the College magazine.

One day in 1955, I saw in the newspapers a Railways notice for recruitment for office clerks in Northern Railways. I applied for this job. I soon got a call to appear for the test at Ramjas Higher Secondary School No. 5 at Karl Bagh, New Delhi. I travelled to New Delhi from Rae Kote to appear in the test. This was my first visit to New Delhi, where I stayed with my aunt at Gandhi Nagar. My aunt's son, Bahadur Chand, who had joined the Ministry of Defence at New Delhi soon after Partition, took me to the test venue. He had taken one day's leave. He waited at the test venue for duration of the test, and then took me back to his home. He did not want me to get lost in New Delhi.

Later in the day, he took me to India Gate, and we had an ice cream together. We had met after long years of separation due to Partition. We had lived together in Kot Khan Pakistan and now our families were living at different places. Then we went to Lodhi Road Bridge, where he showed me some jungle area (which became Defence Colony) at a distance where they had purchased a 300 square yard plot of land for about Rs 3,000 to build his home. Our entire journey was on an ordinary bicycle driven by him, with me sitting on the back seat. In those days, traffic on Delhi roads was minimal, and consisted mainly of people on bicycles. I was highly impressed by Delhi life as compared to life at Rae Kote.

I passed the test. A letter of appointment soon arrived by post. I left the college in 1955 and joined the Northern Railways Divisional office at Ferozepur. I felt sad to leave my college, but the family needed money. My parents wanted me to join the service, and continue my studies as a private student, i.e., just study on my own and take the examinations. In any case, it was difficult for me to go college without even a rupee in my pocket.

It was difficult for me to continue my studies as a private student without regular classes. My priority was to appear for my Intermediate Examination. I tried to join a college at Ferozepur for Practical Classes (*Editor's note: These classes consisted of laboratory work, which was part of the examination.*) in Physics and Chemistry but no college was willing to admit me. I took the help of one teacher for about one month. I also required permission from my office to appear for any examination. This permission was initially refused but I waited, made some friends, and then got permission to appear in the examination.

Nevertheless, in November 1956 I passed the Faculty of Science (Non-medical) Intermediate examination of Punjab University.

During my service with the Railways, I realized that I had made a great blunder to leave college, where I was always a topper. I also realized that during working life, while interacting with colleagues and friends you learn the realities of life in better perspective than the advice you get from home, where there is sometimes a direct vested interest.

Now I was again looking for a change. I applied in response to an advertisement for admission to Government School of Engineering at Nilokheri. There were written tests spread over four days for different subjects. I was selected in this open competition, and decided to leave my job to join this course.

I could not take such a major step in my life without my parents' approval. I was able to sell the idea of joining the engineering course for better prospects. Initially, my father would not agree. My mother, who was the real boss at home, was also reluctant. But, in the end, it was a yes, with support from my older brother, working in the Indian Navy as an engineer, who sent his yes by telegram.

After working for 20 months in the Railways, I joined the engineering school at Nilokheri in June 1957. I decided to stay in the hostel. My *mausi* (mother's sister) lived with her family in Nilokheri. She was a great moral support throughout my stay of two years there. I would often venture out to her home at Kisan Vasti, about 1 km from the school, where she lived with a large family of six sons and two daughters. They had a small house, but owned several other properties, and also had more than 15 acres of agricultural land. This was all allotted to them as compensation for the large properties they had left back in Pakistan. By all standards, they were well off – much better off than my family.

Life at Nilokheri was very disciplined. We woke up at 5 am, reaching the playground for PT (Physical Training) at 05.45. We ran one km, and did some PT exercises. We ran back to the hostel at 6.30 am, and were in classroom by 7.30 am. We had a one hour break for lunch at 12.30 pm and classes ended at 4.00 pm. We were back to the playground for one hour between 5.00 and 6.00 pm. There was attendance call in hostel at 8:00 pm to make sure that everyone was in the hostel. It was lights off at 10:00 pm.

What a strenuous schedule for six days a week! Sunday was the only day to take stock and see where you are in studies, games or clothes washing, etc. Yet, we found time once a month to arrange small parties in our dormitory to discuss the teachers and help each other to copy our notes and drawings.

I was short of money those days. To save money, I went without breakfast for the first six months till my first year loan of Rs 850 became available to me. Having stood first in my first year, in my second year, I got a scholarship of Rs 20 per month. I also took a loan of Rs 650 in the second year of my study. A displaced person grant of Rs 40 per month was also sanctioned by the Punjab Government and paid at the end of each year. It appeared there was more money in studies than while in service in the Railways!

I paid back my mother the initial Rs 350 I had taken at admission time.

While I was at Nilokheri, my *mausi* showed me a prospective groom for my younger sister. They got married in 1961. The only thing we checked in him was that he was good looking, belonged to a respectable family, and had 6 acres of land in his name. My *mausi* was satisfied with the required criteria.

I graduated in 1959 with a Diploma in Civil Engineering with Honours, and first merit position. My mother was proud that I had done the right thing in leaving railways. Soon an appointment letter arrived from the Public Works Department of the Punjab government. In those days, successful students from this engineering school automatically received an appointment, without further application or interview. I joined service as a Section Officer.

In the next two and half years, I completed my AMIE (India), which is equivalent to a degree (as contrasted with a Diploma) in Engineering. Soon after, I started looking for a better job.

My younger sister's marriage was fixed for December 21, 1961. My older brother S L Bhatla had taken leave from the Navy to be part of the wedding ceremonies. However, just a few days before the wedding date, the Indian Government launched movement to liberate Goa, and my brother was called back to Navy duty. He was compelled to miss the wedding ceremony. These are the hassles of military life that we had to face.

In the absence of my elder brother, I was the manager of all arrangements. My father was available for advice but running around was left to the younger lot.

The wedding ceremony was to be performed at Rae Kote. The *barat*, about 50 people consisting of the groom, and his family, relatives and friends, would come from Nilokheri, which was about 150 km away by bus. They were scheduled to reach on December 21 at 16.00 hours, and given a tea party on their arrival.

The *barat* would arrive at our home for the wedding ceremony at 20.00 hours, with dinner at 21.00 hours, and hot milk at 22.30.hours. The next day, breakfast at 09.00 hours, lunch at 12.30 hours, and departure of the *barat* at 15.00 hours.

What a gruelling schedule!

With all the Bhatla brotherhood at service throughout the proceedings, all the wedding ceremonies went well. The *vidai* (see off) of the daughter was very emotional for my father and mother. Then, we had to arrange the departure of relatives who had come from all over Punjab. If I can remember any day when I was most tired, this day would come to my mind.

Tired or not, the difficult times brought about by Partition seemed to be over. My elder brother became a commissioned officer in the Indian Navy in 1962. In 1963, I became a Class I Officer in the Border Roads Organization of the Ministry of Transport. My younger brother, Dr K L Bhatla, became a lecturer at Hans Raj College in Delhi in 1965.

My mother's prayers and strict financial control with minimum resources had paid off.

### **Epilogue**

My father died in 1988 at age 92, and my mother died in 2005 at age 94. Throughout their lives, they had a lasting impact on the lives of their children. My mother was a strong willed lady, who wanted to have it her way in any family matter. On the other hand, my father was a docile person who would never like to see a conflict situation. Yet, in spite of many tensions after our disruption from Kot Khan Pakistan, their togetherness seemed a perfect match. ?❖

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