

Our Struggle to Recover from India's Partition



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Editor's note: This is the third 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](#).

When India became independent in August 1947, the lives of the entire Bhatla brotherhood of about 25 families at Kot Khan Village in Jhang district, Pakistan were destroyed. All of us were forced to move and become refugees in India, where we became scattered in different places.

Editor's note: The story of the family's move is [available here](#).

Early morning on August 31, 1947, we reached Attari railway 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 of hunger and fear.

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

We boarded the evening train to Ludhiana, where we spent the night near District courts. The situation at Ludhiana seemed bad, as there were several dead bodies lying around outside the railway station.

From Ludhiana city, we went to Rae Kote village, where we had a distant relative. When we reached Rae Kote on September 1, 1947, we had virtually nothing. Luckily, the gold ornaments recovered in time with the help of Muslim friends in Kot Khan were safe with us to start our life again.

My father had been a *Kar Dar* (Estate Manager) for one of the Khan Brothers in Pakistan but could not find proper work in Rae Kote. In shock, he left it to his wife and his sons to do what they liked. My mother was a strong willed lady who was able to manage the affairs of the house with whatever little money she had. Her top priority was her children's education.

The Muslim families in Rae Kote had left for Pakistan, and there were empty houses waiting to be occupied by Hindu refugees. We got a house in Rae Kote and stayed there for about five months, till February 1948. During this period, we did not do much except try to find the whereabouts of our relatives who were also refugees from Pakistan.

My father and mother had a bent of mind towards Sikh religion. They knew the Sikh scriptures Sukhmani Sahib by heart. One of my father's uncles had become a *kesdhari* Sikh. He did not marry and became a *granthi* at a gurudwara in Meghiana, the capital of Jhang district. After that, most Bhatla families in Jhang were more inclined towards the Sikh religion. The Bhatla brotherhood had constructed a gurudwara at Kot Khan, even though there was not even a single Sikh family living there.

While the refugees in India were struggling to raise some income, my parents were busy in reciting Sukhmani every morning and evening. Their strong belief was in God and they thought that everything would get well with time. This became an obsession after the tragic circumstances of losing everything because of India's Partition.

In the pre-Partition days, Guru Sant Maya Ram was a regular visitor to Kot Khan in Pakistan and had a large following there. A large compound with some rooms had been constructed at an open place about half a mile from the village boundary. The Guru used to stay here every year for two months during the season of date harvesting and summer holidays. Large congregations gathered to listen to his discourses on Gita He also used to advise his followers on all types of subjects, including marriage, children and their future. The Bhatla brotherhood used to have lot of faith in this Guru.

After Partition, the Guru became a link for knowing the whereabouts of our relatives and other contacts. My mother was among the devoted followers of the Guru.

After the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, the Guru came to Rae Kote and prevailed upon our families to move from Rae Kote to Rohtak for safety He believed that Ludhiana would soon become part of a Sikh-dominated Khalistan, which would be formed along the lines of Muslim-dominated Pakistan. He thought it would be better to shift to Rohtak, which had a Hindu majority.

My mother and some other families in Rae Kote became strongly inclined to the idea of shifting to Rohtak, where her brothers were living. My father was not in favour of leaving the Bhatla brotherhood in Rae Kote. The Guru and my mother prevailed. In February 1948, we left for Rohtak by train, with the Guru accompanying us. We travelled without tickets – our journey was free because we were refugees.

We were asked by the Guru to carry *atta* (wheat flour) to Rohtak, as there was a shortage of good quality *atta* there. Later I remember, Sant Maya Ram asking his other followers cooking his food to borrow some *atta* from us for his food. During the journey on the way, he told us that he originally belonged to Lehragaga, a village near Jind.

Life in the Rohtak refugee camp was miserable. In May 1948, we decided to shift to Nigana village near Rohtak, where some agricultural land was supposed to be allotted to my parents, and to my mother's brothers. A house was allotted to us, and we seemed to settle at Nigana. Soon the schools opened, and boys and girls were going to various schools in and around Nigana.

My elder brother and my younger brother were admitted to schools but I was left out. My father wanted me to join him in some business that he may do, instead of going to school. After some hesitation, my mother agreed to this.

In our first year after Partition, and later too, we missed those date trees at Kot Khan, which gave us fruit for the whole year. The practice at Kot Khan was to store date fruit in clay pitchers. There used to be some eight rows, with stacked four pitchers stacked in each row. My father often used to go to Meghiana town, and he would bring some *badam* (almonds), *pista* (pistachios) and *kishmish* (raisins). Now, as refugees, we could not even think about buying them.

In 1948, one of my uncles had taken a contract to manage several mango orchards (about 25 square km in area) in village Jahaan Khela in Hoshiarpur district. About thirty male members of our extended family got together, became equal partners, and worked hard for three months in those orchards. We picked the mangoes and carted them to Hoshiarpur city for sale. We sold about sixty to seventy trucks of mangoes in Hoshiarpur's *Mandi* (market). My father and I were partners in this venture. Each partner received 576

rupees, and my share was half of this, i.e., 288 rupees. This helped us to move on with our lives in those difficult days.

This work was over in three months and we were soon back in Nigana. When winter came, we were back in Hoshiarpur to pick and sell guavas. This time we spent five months there, picking fruits and selling in Hoshiarpur *mandi*. We were back to Nigana in March 1949. In this way, some money did come to the family and my mother felt empowered keeping control of all family affairs.

My older brother, S L Bhatla, had joined school in Kahnour, and passed his Matriculation examination in 1948. He joined Indian Navy in 1948 as a boy cadet when he was 15 years old. I remember that from 1948 to 1952, he used to send the family ten rupees every month, which appeared good money in those days. His courageous action to join the Navy when he was 15 years of age and then his discipline and hard work throughout served our family well as an example of how to cope in those initial difficult years. In the Navy, he rose to the position of Commander, and was one of the first submariners in the Indian Navy. He is now Managing Director of Crown Corporation and settled in Mumbai.

Bhagwan Dass, my mother's younger brother, took strong exception to my not going to school. He had hot words with my mother. She then decided to send me to school. Bhagwan Das took me and got me admitted in a school at Kalanour in Rohtak district. This is how I joined back school in 1949, nearly two years after Partition. The school was about 4 km away from Nigana village, and I walked back and forth from school every day. After so many years have passed, even now I always fondly remember my uncle Bhagwan Dass for his timely and strongly worded advice to my mother to send me to school.

It appears that Nigana did not suit our family. The climate was harsh and the sons were getting sick more frequently. My mother, after some initial bonhomie with her relatives, was frustrated at Nigana. She agreed to return to Rae Kote. In the summer of 1949, we moved quietly back to Rae Kote, where our other Bhatla relatives had settled.

Life at Rae Kote was not easy. When we left Rae Kote in February 1948, my father gave our three-bedroom house to a Sikh family for a mere sum of Rs 20. When we left Nigana in 1949, we again gave our two-room house, which had an open courtyard and a large shady tree, for Rs 30 to a Sharma family. When we reached Rae Kote back in the summer of 1949, we were out on the road without a roof on our head.

The Bhatla brotherhood at Rae Kote helped us search for a house. Finally, we were able to rent a two-room house with a large verandah and a courtyard. The rent was Rs 3 per month, with the rent to be paid in advance every six months. We lived in this house for four years, and became close friends with the landlord. He liked us so much that he did not want to charge any rent – but wanted us not to leave the house. The main reasons were my father used to deliver rent in time and his house maintenance was always kept update.

In Rae Kote, I joined the K R S D B high school in 1949. Now there was no more talk of me helping my father in any non-school venture. The teachers at this school were very helpful. Mr Gurnam Singh of Binjal village was the Headmaster. He always told us to be frugal and save money. He would very often deliver lectures on character building, obedience to parents and teachers, taking bath daily, playing games, etc. He would specially help the bright students.

In Kot Khan, we learnt Urdu written in the Arabic script. In this school, we were taught Hindi written in Devanagiri. Initially, I had difficulties writing in Devanagiri, but soon I was able to pick it up. Sanskrit was also added as a subject in Standard 7.

There was one teacher who taught both Hindi and Sanskrit. I did feel difficulty in picking up some difficult Hindi words but the standards of Hindi in those days were quite relaxed. Further, we were allowed to write History and Geography examinations in Urdu or Hindi. Obviously, I chose Urdu, like most other students. I started standing first in every subject, except Hindi and Sanskrit.

I appeared for the *Middle School Examination of Punjab Education Department* for Standard 8. This examination included Hindi as a subject. I passed in the First Division (*Editor's note: First Division meant getting more 60% marks. It was a high level of achievement at the time.*) and stood first in my school. Then, in Standard 9 and onwards, I took Science and Drawing as my subjects instead of Hindi and Sanskrit.

One of our teachers was Mr Des Raj Sharma. He taught Arithmetic up to Standard 8, but he had the reputation of solving any arithmetic question orally even up to Standard 10. So when other students and I had any problems with Arithmetic, we would ask him, and he would show us how to do them. Mr. Bakhshish Singh taught algebra and geometry. He was famous for being a good teacher. Further, he was compassionate in dealing with students. He would personally invite good students to his house and encourage them for better life ahead.

My younger brother was studying in the same school. He was a bright student and doing well. My younger sister had joined the Government Girls School at Rae Kote but was not a bright student. However, she passed her matriculation examination without missing any year.

Initially I had virtually no friends at school but with my progress in studies, things changed quickly. Then, I had many friends. Two of them need special mention. Chander Mohan Bhanot was very good in Hindi and Sanskrit, and his hand writing style often fascinated me. He retired as a Professor of English from Delhi University, and is settled in Delhi. The other was Mr Pran Nath, who was a very good student in my class at Rae Kote. We used to go to the fields at Rae Kote to study together and revise our lessons. He retired from Indian Railways as a Chief Engineer and is settled in New Delhi. Both of us first earned a Diploma in engineering, and later passed the AMIE (India) examination, which is equivalent to an engineering Degree (*Editor's note: A Degree is considered professionally superior to a Diploma*). We have maintained contacts throughout our lives after school days.

Our first and second years after Partition were bleak to the extent that the family did not celebrate any festivals, except some Puja, which always took place. However, on *Dusserah* days, we would venture out to see Ravan go up in flames.

At Rae Kote, a festival called *Chhapar da mela* was held for four days a year in the month of September every year. This was always a time for entertainment. This was also a time for political parties to showcase their activities. I remember walking up and down the *mela* road for hours, looking at the various stalls.

We also used to go a Sikh shrine called *Tahli Sahib Gurudwara*, where, long ago, the founder of the Sikh religion, Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib Jee had rested under the shade of a *sheesham* tree. On special days like the birthdays of Sikh Gurus, my friends and I would sometimes go and have meals at *guru ka Langar* (free food provided at the shrine). This appeared so natural to my family, as we had been close to the Sikh religion from pre-Partition days.

The most common games at school were football and hockey. One class period was set aside for sports, during which we played practice matches. The students not playing would watch the game, and support one of the teams. Our football team was very good, and we played in district level matches. I participated in hockey but this team was newly formed, and did not progress much up to 1954, when I finished my

school studies. The school also had the National Cadet Corps (NCC) scheme, which was optional. I did not join it because it was just a lot of time wasted in parades and running around.

Our financial situation was difficult, but there were others in much difficult circumstances. We had encashed one or two pre-Partition post office deposit certificates of Rs 1,000. (In those days, when you put Rs 850 in a post office deposit certificate, it would mature to Rs 1,000 in five years). We also sold a 10-*tola* (about 100 grams) gold bar to keep as buffer to pay for food and supplies.

Fortunately, the children's education was almost free because there were no monthly fees to be paid, though we had to spend Rs 3-4 per month for the sundry expenses of the three school-going children. Some type of grant to displaced students from Pakistan for Standard 7 upwards was arranged by the school and given to student's parents every year. The amount was 7 to 8 rupees per month. This worked well for families with poor resources. Fortunately, there was no inflation those days, and grains and pulses were available at cheap rates.

In 1952, we purchased a cow to assure good milk supply for the health of the family. This proved a blessing in disguise because my father became busy looking after the animal, and my mother was happy receiving milk for household. Keeping the animals was a practice in smaller towns in those days. This also improved our economy to some extent, as half the milk would be sold to recover cost of fodder, etc. Later we had changed the cow to a buffalo and this went on for several years.

1953 was a bad year for the family. The effects of the malnutrition for the last five years were showing up. There was more sickness at home and younger family members were suffering from malaria, typhoid, etc. My younger brother was missing classes more often. My younger sister was keeping fine. There was a government dispensary at Rae Kote, which provided the necessary medicines free. You always needed to buy some medicines from the market. We roughed it out but it still led to stress for our parents.

Nevertheless, in 1953, we made efforts to buy one of the several houses that had been left behind by Muslim families that moved to Pakistan. This was not easy. My elder brother, who had joined the Indian Navy in 1948, was using his influence as a military man to get some house allotted to us.

We were finally allotted a house, which we could buy for Rs 1,275. The payment was to be made in seven instalments without any interest. We occupied the house and paid the first instalment. We were now in our own six-room double story house. Life seemed closer to recovery from the setbacks we had suffered.

Was this the beginning of our journey back to prosperity?❖

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