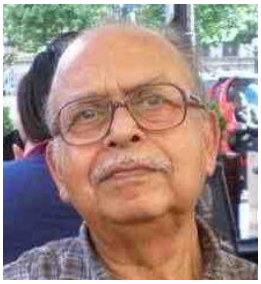
Living through the1947 Partition of Bengal -1



Tapas Kumar Sen

Tapas Sen was born in Kolkata (1934), and brought up in what now constitutes Bangladesh. He migrated to India in 1948, and joined the National Defence Academy in January 1950. He was commissioned as a fighter pilot into the Indian Air Force on 1 April 1953, from where he retired in 1986 in the rank of an Air Commodore. He now leads an active life, travelling widely and writing occasionally.

Editor's note: This article originally appeared on Air Commodore Sen's blog TKS' Tales. *It is reproduced here with the author's permission. This is Part 1; Part 2 is available here.*

My family

India saw tremendous political ferment in the in the late 1910s. The disappointment over the Montague-Chelmsford reforms of 1918 resulting in the diarchic Government of India Act of 1919 was converted to horror and anger by the passage of the Rowlett Act, and the massacre at Jalianwalla Bagh on 13 April 1919.

A new form of protest – Satyagraha – was being tried out in India by Mahatma Gandhi. He channelled the fuming mass anger into the first massive truly national movement of non-cooperation. Many government servants left their jobs, and many students left their schools and colleges, as these were labelled as slave making factories.

Baba – my father – was one such student who left his studies and walked out. He was then a second-year student of the Calcutta Medical College. His father had passed away only recently, leaving his widowed mother and six younger siblings to his care. It was an awesome responsibility, but the strength of the call from the nation was irresistible.

Baba, like thousands of other young men at that time, wandered all over the country attending one political action to another. Then, one day in 1922, the Chauri-Chaura incident happened, leading to deaths even though the aim of the movement was for nonviolent non-cooperation.

The Mahatma called off the movement. Hundreds of thousands of young men, who had left their homes schools and jobs, forming the mass and the momentum of this huge movement, were left adrift. To say that most of them felt disappointed and let down would be an understatement. This multitude of youth had to re-invent their lives.

Baba found another medical practitioner, engaged in a movement for social reforms, whose philosophy attracted him. This person was Sri Sri Thakur Anukul Chandra. Thakur Anukul Chandra and his organisation, the Satsang, were for Baba like finding a shore for a drifting boat. He joined the organisation and became one of his earliest disciples. He re-joined the Calcutta Medical College, and graduated from it in 1924.

Now he faced enormous challenges. He needed money to set himself up as a medical doctor in private practice, and he did not have any. The family headquarters at Barisal provided him with a lump-sum of Rs 500/= to set up his medical practice.

This amount was not adequate for Baba's needs. Instead, Baba used that money to enrol himself for a six-month course for a diploma in public health; jobs in the field of public health were expected to be available.

His plan worked. Once he had his diploma, he readily found a job as a Health Officer under the District Board of Purulia. Purulia, a district of Bengal, had been merged into Bihar and Orissa when Bengal was partitioned by Lord Curzon in 1905. In 1911, when the partition of Bengal was undone, Purulia was retained by Bihar. At Purulia, Baba set up a small household, and brought his mother and youngest sister over from Barisal to stay with him.

He then came under social pressure to '*get married and settle down'*. He gave in. A match was arranged for him with the eldest daughter of an upcoming engineer working with Bengal Public Works Department. He got married in 1927.

Purulia was in a totally undeveloped backward area. Living conditions were hard. The District Board did not pay well. Baba has his first child in 1928. When a second child was on its way in 1930, Baba needed a better place to stay in, and perhaps a little more income. He found a job as the District Health Officer of Jessore, where both these needs were fulfilled. He moved to Jessore by the middle of 1930.

Jessore (now in Bangladesh) was a small town in Bengal. In the 1930s, it was important enough to be a district headquarters. It had a District Magistrate and Collector, and a Police Superintendent. It had a District Court and therefore a District Judge.

Jessore had an elected municipality, and the townsfolk were active in its politics. Jessore had a District Board, an elected body, for local self-government. The District Board had, I think, three appointed executive officers. One looked after the administration, one was the district engineer and the third was my father, the district health officer.

Jessore had a District Library, which my later memory finds to have been reasonably well stocked. It even had an electricity supply company, though, like most other houses on the Chaurasta, our house was not electrified.

Jessore 1946-1947

We had moved out of Jessore in 1942, and had come back from Pabna after our forced exile for four years in 1946. We had got our homestead back from the government, which had taken it away from us for the war effort in 1942. Baba had given up his job with the District Board as the District Health Officer in 1944, after the board administration had been taken over by the Muslim League in 1940. He had stuck on for four years but could not tolerate the League administration any more.

He had started practicing medicine at a late age: he was 47 in 1945. After struggling for about two years, he had just about settled down in his practice in 1947 when the question of partition came about.

In 1946, we had just lived through a series of mini civil wars, laced with genocides starting from the infamous 'Direct Action Day' of the Muslim League on 16 August 1946, and its consequences in Noakhali in October 1946, and in interior Bihar early in 1947.

In 1947, I was in my very aware adolescent thirteenth year. I was in the final year of secondary schooling, preparing for my Matriculation under the University of Calcutta. Through my eyes, the environment looked surreal.

In the midst of all the mayhem that was going on throughout northern India, Jessore was peaceful and quiet. The district as a whole was marginally of Muslim majority. The *Sadar* (main) subdivision of the district, which contained the township of Jessore, was marginally Muslim majority. The adjoining subdivision of Bongaon had a clear Hindu majority. The town of Jessore itself was predominantly Hindu, perhaps to the extent of over ninety percent. Our neighbourhood was peaceful, and seemed secure.

From Jessore, Kolkata was close – less than 60 miles away. Yet, the blood bath of August 1946 on the streets of Kolkata had not disturbed the peaceful environment of Jessore. Even the Noakhali disturbances did not disturb the peace of Jessore. All the political melodrama in New Delhi – the formation of a constituent assembly and its boycott by the Muslim League, the formation of a joint Congress-League interim government at the centre and the internal sabotage of that government by the Muslim League – made little difference to our daily lives in peaceful Jessore.

As 1946 rolled to an end, the constitutional confusion continued unabated. By the beginning of the New Year, India had a new Viceroy. Lord Mountbatten replaced Lord Wavell.

Even after the arrival of Mountbatten in 1947, for the first four and a half months of the year up to the middle of May 1947, we in a Hindu majority town of Jessore felt quite confidently comfortable that all this shouting and flag waving by the Muslim Leaguers was just *Bakwas* (nonsense).

Thus, when the May 15th 1947 plan of provincial grouping was announced, and as the small print of the British proposal became apparent to us, there was consternation. The May 1947 plan was rejected out of hand by the Congress and by the majority of the politically conscious Hindu middle class in Bengal. I believe that the Muslim middle class really did not exist in Bengal.

Then came the 3rd June 1947 Plan of Mountbatten. The Plan called for Pakistan to be carved out of India.

I was then in the process of recovering from a bout of typhoid. In 1947, it was not an easy disease to treat. Baba normally did not prescribe any medicines for the members of his family. Whenever any of us needed medical attention, we were automatically referred to Baba's friend and colleague Dr Jiban Ratan Dhar. He was one of the foremost practicing Allopath of the town, and was our neighbour of sorts. A small patch of woods and his private *Pukur* (a pond for bathing and fish rearing) separated our houses.

Socially, the two families were very close. Dr J R Dhar's brother, Dr Nil Ratan Dhar, was Baba's batch mate in the Medical College. Dr J R Dhar and his elder brother, Sri Amulya Ratan Dhar, stayed in that house close to ours. Dr N R Dhar stayed outside Jessore, and we saw him only during his periodic visits to the town. The children of the Dhar family were somewhat older than us, the Sen Children were, but were quite friendly with us. We often went swimming in their Pukur.

As I fell ill, I was referred to Jiban Babu. His medication did not seem very effective. I remained in bed for over four weeks. Ultimately, Dr Dey, who was a Homeopath, took over my treatment, and put me back on my feet. It took him another three weeks or so to achieve that. In these six or seven weeks that I lay in my bed with fever, the political scene of the country changed with amazing rapidity. For a boy of thirteen, the process was bewildering and difficult to comprehend.

Partition is coming

In the *Muffasil* (countryside) town of Jessore, the newspapers carried the details of the 3rd June plan only on the 5th of June. (We did not have access to any other source of information.) We were quite stunned to read that the major political leaders had agreed to a partition of the country into two dominions, based on religion practiced by the majority.

It looked so insane! Bengal was a province that was marginally of Muslim majority. In Bengal, most of the cities, major towns and even large village complexes were completely Hindu! Even in the Eastern (Muslim majority) part of the province, Hindu majority towns were the norm rather than exception. Jessore, Khulna, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Faridpur, Barisal, Nadia, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri – all these towns were Hindu dominated. Large Village complexes such as Brahmanbaria, Kalia, Senhati, Bikrampur etc. had very substantial Hindu majority. The majority of Muslim population stayed in small villages all around these Hindu clusters. How could one contemplate a partition on religious lines?

The stunned public had no time to digest the implications of the political storm unleashed. In two weeks' time, the British Parliament was ready with the Indian Independence Act. In a war like strategy of

keeping the enemy under psychological pressure, the target date of transfer of power was brought forward from March 1948 to 15 August 1947.

In these few momentous days between 3rd June and 15th August of 1947, the country rolled forward to a new destiny. It took the powers that were just these 72 days to tear the country apart. All the patient work going on to create a new nation through consensus, the formation of the constituent assembly in December 1946, its nuanced step by step progress in its first three sessions in 1946 despite the boycott by the Muslim League, despite the dithering of the princely states, despite the sabotage of the interim Government by Liaqat Ali Khan, the devoted and dedicated work done by the constituent assembly came to a naught.

The political system of the country, just like the average man in the street, had no way to influence the outcome. A thirteen-year-old schoolboy in his sickbed remained thoroughly puzzled with the momentum of the events all around him.

The political environment was on fire. It seemed that the partition of the country was a done thing. We had no say in the matter. Now the new political demand was to include a partition of Bengal so that only half of it went to the impending Pakistan. Sri Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, a leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, came into the town to hold a rally. The response that he got from the townsfolk was overwhelming.

In a few days, it became clear that a decision to partition Bengal and Punjab was included as a part of the deal partitioning the country.

The next concern for us was to find out whether Jessore town would fall on the Indian or Pakistan side of the partition. The westernmost subdivision of the district was Bongaon, and it was clearly a Hindu majority area. The Jessore Sadar subdivision clubbed with Bongaon was also Hindu majority, as the town itself was predominantly Hindu. Unfortunately, if it was not clubbed with Bongaon, Jessore itself was marginally Muslim majority. It was not clear whether the line would run along district boundary of sub-divisional boundary or arbitrarily through the land mass. We just hoped and prayed. Fortunately, at this time there was no communal conflict in Bengal. The carnage witnessed in 1946 had scared us all.

The 72 days to August 15, 1947 passed very quickly. The momentum of the process of partition made the kaleidoscopic view of the current events fascinating, if hazy, in my fever dimmed memory. Many things happened.

Delhi, Punjab and NWFP burned in vicious fury of communal genocide. In July 1947, a distinct combined Hindu-Muslim army formation was created and placed under a British officer to control these riots in the Punjab sector but the effort failed. After the June 3 1947 declaration, the effect of communal virus was visible even amongst army officers. The army had stopped being impartial.

The humongous process of partitioning the army/navy/air-force of India into two began. The police forces of two major states Bengal and Punjab had to be partitioned too. All the officers of the central civil services like ICS and IPS had to choose to serve one or the other newly formed country. Adverse effects of this chaos were visible in the administration.

While all these happenings were all around us, what were our thoughts about our own future? There was a real possibility that the district of Jessore would go to Pakistan while there was real hope that Jessore town might fall on the Indian side of the border. What were out feelings? I was barely 13 years old and my comprehension of the political situation was perhaps immature. Emotionally, however, I had become quite perceptive. Today, when I think back and reconstruct our emotional turmoil of those days I am surprised with the clarity of the fragments of memories that I recollect.

Emotionally, Baba was not ready to give up and move out. One day in July 1947, Baba came back from his chamber in a foul mood. It seems one Muslim gentleman from Kolkata had come to see him at his

chamber, not seeking any medical advice but to buy our house in exchange of his own house in Kolkata. Alternatively, he was ready to offer Rupees 60,000 for our house.

Baba had been affronted by the offer. He had no intention of moving out, and the offer price, in his eyes, was ridiculous. He was just not interested. I was still in my sickbed. As I heard him narrate all this to Ma, a thought struck me. Why was Baba fuming? He had a good sense of humour. If someone came with a silly proposal, I expected him to be amused by it. This irritation was out of character. It seems to me now that I was too young then to understand that the outburst must have been caused by a creeping sense of insecurity that must have encroached upon him silently.

The month of July was soon gone. By the time August came about our anxiety about the fate of Jessore town increased. Slowly, some people started exchanging property and moving away. Initially, people who started moving out were not the most influential in town. We ignored the families who sold out.

Independence

15th August 1947 was upon us.

Very strangely, the euphoria that we had expected was not actually felt. The Radcliff demarcation of the boundary between Pakistan and India was not yet known. We did not know which flag we should fly. Baba decided to treat the day as a day of mourning. No lights to be lit. *Nishpradeep Ratri* (dark night), as opposed to a celebratory Deepavali.

I was disappointed and requested Ma to obtain permission to fly a flag. I was ready to fly both flags if we did not know which one would be appropriate – but at least fly a flag. I do not know what transpired between them, but on 14th August 1947 night, Ma sat up late and stitched two flags, both about a foot in length. It was a tiny gesture. I was still very weak from my fever but she allowed me to climb the stairs to the roof early in the morning, and hoist those two pieces of cloth on two twigs foraged from the ground for me by my second sister, my Monidi. My older sister was away at Kolkata doing her B.Ed. My parents remained indoors. My brother at eight years of age was not interested in sentimental things like flag hoisting.

So it was just me and Monidi that stood there and saluted the two flags, without knowing what the future held for us. None of us at that time thought that soon we would leave all this and move away forever. And this to us was our whole universe.

On the morning of 18th August, the Radcliff Award was announced to the public. It brought a strange hollow feeling to be told that from that morning we were not 'Indian' any more. Emotionally it was impossible to accept that notion. But legally, we had become citizens of Pakistan. It was difficult to comprehend the meaning of becoming a Pakistani citizen. The whole concept of Pakistan was insane. Two pieces of land a thousand miles apart where a good thirty five percent of population were to be considered inferior citizens was to be considered as a nation?

And the overwhelming bulk of the middle class, the doctors, the engineers, the lawyers, the professors, the zamindars, the administrators that ran the country were to be deemed as inferior citizens overnight because they professes a religion other than the hoi-polloi? It was an insane thought.

By some strange manipulation of some politicians and evil machination of our foreign rulers, such a country had come about, but could it last? We could not make ourselves believe that it would. It is all *Maya*. It is a soap bubble that is rising out of the suds and would soon disappear. That was our initial perception.

We were bewildered and saddened. But in Bengal at least, we were not frightened or disheartened. The overall feeling was not to run but to see how the new reality takes its shape.

Alas, the reality turned out to be rather harsh. On 20th August, that is just two days after it was known that we were actually in Pakistan, our house was requisitioned by the provincial government. We were

given just 48 hours to vacate the house. We were not alone in this quandary. Quite a number of prominent Hindu citizens owning large houses faced the same problem. They were just ordered to vacate their houses, and hand the property over to the local administration. We ran around trying to find redress but to no avail.

Some of these households that were thus dislodged just went away to the other side of the border. Baba, however, was not thinking in terms of running away.

In Jessore, our closest social contact was with the family of Sri K N Ghosh, who was the retired District Engineer. He had also decided that he would not migrate out of Pakistan. Baba had a long chat with him. Sri Ghosh helped Baba in finding a small house close to the Ghosh house, and we moved into to that rented accommodation.

It was impossible to fit in all our possessions into that tiny house. Fortunately, a makeshift garage, where our 1928 vintage Chevrolet convertible was rusting away for the previous four years, was still available to us. It was filled up to its roof with our possessions.

We trudged on. Our life at the end of September 1947, was not much different from what we had seen in the previous six months albeit, without the shelter of our own beautiful house.❖

Continue to Part 2.
