

Escaping from Amritsar's post-Partition fears



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Born in 1941, Vinod was brought up and educated in Amritsar. He attended Government Medical College, and subsequently trained as a surgeon at PGI, Chandigarh. He left for USA in 1969, and retired in 2003 as Director of Critical Care Services at a teaching hospital in Michigan. Married with two grown sons, he continues to visit India at least once a year.

Why we ended up in Delhi in January 1948 is not entirely clear to me - I was only six years old then. But I do recall being in old Delhi in an area called Mori Gate. This was located near the Delhi Railway Station, which is now known as Old Delhi Railway Station. We were living with my aunt Sheila Tai and her husband Taya Diwan Chand. Their son Ramesh, my cousin, also lived there. The house in Mori Gate was owned by an old Muslim gentleman known to us as Maulvi sahib. The narrow street had mostly Muslim inhabitants.

My mother and Sheila Tai were real sisters. Their husbands were half-brothers (sharing a common father, my grandfather), who lived in the paternal joint family home in Amritsar. So, the two sisters had lived together in Amritsar for many years after they got married.

The large family house had been constructed by my grandfather in the 1920s. It was bequeathed to my father before India's partition. Located in Goal Bagh outside the walled city of Amritsar, it had extensive grounds outside, which were often used as a playground for cricket, football and volleyball games, and also as a venue for political rallies. After the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, Gandhiji had addressed a public meeting from the terrace of the under-construction house. For years afterwards, one could tell a tonga driver to take you to Gandhiji's *kothi*, and one would reach our house.

Sheila Tai used to occupy a full suite of rooms in the house. Since she was the older sister, she ran the household with an iron hand. Her husband, Diwan Chand, was often gone for months on end leaving, my father to look after all expenses.

In moving from Amritsar to Delhi, my family was trying to escape the danger arising from the creation of Pakistan. For us, this was second attempt to escape the Hindu-Muslim riots of India's partition. Our entire family, except my father, had evacuated from Amritsar to Mussoorie in May of 1947 because of the tensions in Amritsar.

In Mussoorie, I had witnessed the joyous celebration of India's independence on 15th August 1947. My uncle, who actually had escaped the mayhem of Pakistan, had been prominent amongst those distributing sweets to the rickshaw-pullers at the main square of the hill station.

We moved back to Amritsar in October 1947. The journey in crowded trains was nightmarish. When we reached Amritsar, we found it was a different city, devastated by fires set by rioters in the summer. As we were picked up from the railway station, we passed a truck, which was carrying disfigured and bloated bodies. The stench and image of those bodies in the open truck has stayed with me.

In Amritsar, I was in the municipal school along with my older brother Satish. We were learning Urdu, the language that was now despised by the Hindu and Sikh citizens of Indian Punjab. The simple reason was that our teachers did not know any Hindi or Punjabi, and were given four years to learn these languages.

This semblance of normality was disrupted when Pakistan engineered an invasion of undivided Kashmir. People in Amritsar, barely eighteen miles from the India -Pakistan border feared an invasion by Pakistan.

So those who could, moved to safer cities. My father's half-brother, Diwan Chand, was apparently helping my father with his oriental carpet business by selling the carpets in Delhi. Diwan Chand had already rented the house near Mori Gate in old Delhi. We would see him leave in a tonga with rolled carpets in the back in the morning after breakfast. He would arrive late at night after we had gone to bed.

Life in the Mori Gate house was easy for me, as there was no school. Ramesh was the only one who attended school. The narrow three-storey house had a top floor, which was open, and we would sit in the courtyard enjoying the winter sun. We could see where older kids flew kites from other houses. We were forbidden to play in the street, so marbles or other childhood games were off limit. Sometimes we were allowed to go to the park to play. This small park had old canons all around the fence. We could climb on the canon and pretend that it was a horse. May be the older children waged imaginary battles.

One of the most anxious moment of my young life happened in this house in Delhi. On the evening of 30th of January, 1948 we heard on the radio that Mahatma Gandhi had been killed. Next day, Sheila Tai and my mother decided to go for the funeral of the great leader. They left after breakfast in the morning. The funeral was to occur on the banks of Yamuna River, at a place that later on became Raj Ghat, the memorial to Gandhi.

Evening came and passed into night while five of us children waited for their return. Taya Diwan Chand was nowhere to be found. The All India Radio broadcast mournful music, with intermittent announcements that the crowds for the cremation funerals were enormous. I don't remember if we had anything to eat. Perhaps there were some leftovers in the kitchen. My sister Asha was barely three years old, and there was no one amongst the four boys who knew how to quieten her.

Maulvi sahib, the house owner, had stopped by to tell us that there were twenty lakh people gathered for the funeral. How do you figure out the importance of that number when you can perhaps count up to a hundred? After midnight, even the wailing music on the radio had been turned off. I remember looking at the clear winter sky, huddled with my brothers and Ramesh hoping that my mother and aunt would come back. We would nod off and again wake up for the vigil.

Eventually, they came home around 2 a.m. They looked dishevelled and tired, with their white saris covered with dust. They wanted to take a bath before anything else. I was too young to understand the reasons for Gandhi's murder or what it meant for India. For years after, I heard the plaintive, "If Gandhiji was alive!" from ordinary people. Often I would remember that winter night in Delhi, sometimes even imagining what if my mother and aunt were trampled in a stampede at Gandhi's funeral.

We probably made it back to Amritsar in February or March of 1948.

Our next 'escape' from troubles came the following year in September 1948, when India's ironman Sardar Patel launched a 'police action' against Hyderabad's Nizam, who had refused to join India.

The nerves of people in Amritsar were so jangled by this action that some left for distant cities. This time we landed up with my father's older sister Satya *bu*a. Refugees from Hafizabad (now in Pakistan), they

had spent several months of 1947 in Mussoorie. Now her family had rented a large house in Centre Lane near Bengali Market in Delhi.

In her house, there were also other escapees from Amritsar and Batala, such as our aunts and cousins. My parents, and the parents of my cousins, soon left to go back to Amritsar, but the children remained in Delhi for months. At the back of the house was a courtyard, which was used for sleeping outdoors in the summer time. A huge cement platform was used by children to play hopscotch and by maids to dry clothes.

One of the main purposes of our relatives to come to Delhi was to bring their valuables for safekeeping to Satya *bua*'s house. The house had a large basement, called *tai khana* located underneath the platform in the courtyard. I remember the large tin trunks loaded with saris, clothes and other valuables stored in this underground space. Children were not supposed to go in but we would sneak a peek whenever an aunt arrived to take her stuff back to Punjab.

The cacophonous life with so many children of different ages must have been hard on our aunt and uncle. But they never seemed to complain in our earshot. They were the same uncle and aunt who had looked after so many relatives in Mussoorie, immediately before and after India's partition.

Besides Satya *bua*'s own children, we all separated into similar age groups. We played and fought. Our evening trips to the Bengali market were not common but most welcome for the succulent *rasgoolas* or ice cream. Organized trips to Birla Mandir, Kutub Minar and Okhla dam were fun for all. These sights and sounds we had not seen in our small hometowns. The daylong picnic at Okhla where the water cascades down in a huge roar was a sight. Uncle owned a car and employed a driver. So we would all be packed in the car for the trips.

In the back of the house, there was park where we could play football or cricket. We also discovered the RSS's early morning gathering called *shakha* and joined the group. The games they organized appealed to us, and the stories of Hindu heroes were fascinating. Satish, my brother, and I learnt their songs and could recite them with our eyes closed to the amusement of our elders.

There was a rude awakening about RSS's aims and means when, for their annual function, we were asked to come with money for *guru dhakshana*, a Hindu ritual to honour your teacher. Satish and I had to beg Satya *bua* for money. She refused to give us five rupees that we were each instructed to bring, and instead gave us two rupees each. We went to this meeting where hundreds of youth and grownups wearing white shirts, khaki shorts and black caps were gathered. Some of speeches were beyond our comprehension. But we somehow felt unwelcome and small, because we had not contributed enough money.

A visit by our mother's older sister Vidya masi turned into an invitation to stay with them for a week. After escaping from Lahore, Vidya masi and her family had stayed in our house in Amritsar for a year. She was the oldest sibling of my mother's three sisters and four brothers, and her children were grown up. All her sons, except one, had found jobs in Delhi, and the older girls were married and settled.

Vidya masi's family was now sharing a large government allotted house with another aunt, Chand masi, near Goal Market in Delhi. Chand masi's husband was employed in the central government. We bundled our clothes, and moved to live with Vidya masi and her lanky husband, known to all as Khosla sahib. I believe that he had been chief civil engineer in Lahore but was now retired. The tall, cadaverous uncle remains in my memory as if bent over with twisted fingers of his hands. He probably had severe arthritis.

It was during our stay at his house that we heard of a new, young actress Bina Rai. She was the daughter of one of Khosla sahib's friend. We were rarely allowed to see movies. But this connection always stuck

in my memory as Bina Rai became very popular as the star of her first movie *Kali Ghata* in 1951 and later on in *Anarkali* in 1953.

We were free to live with either Chand masi or Vidya masi, as the large house they shared was barely subdivided. There was a garden in front and a vegetable patch in the back. We were astonished to see tomatoes growing. Our cousins taught us to pluck ripe, red tomatoes and wash them at the tap before biting into them. The faint smell of vegetables such eggplants, purple and glistening in the sun was new to us. Our cousin nicknamed 'Chota' (younger) managed to frighten us with, "Watch out, snake comes in the brinjal plant and looks just like the eggplant!"

The well-paved wide road in front of the house had several trees, planted in the sidewalk. They seemed to bear a large, strange looking green fruit, which had many lobes. I asked Chota, "What is that?"

"Oh, that is *kathal*. You can cook it." Chota informed me. It was the first time I had seen jackfruit. It would be years before I would cook or eat it.

On a Sunday morning, Chota and his brother took us to All India Radio, which was close by. We were there for a children's program. They had managed to secure some passes for the broadcast of the show. We sat on the floor with other children in wonder as the program was broadcast live for a national audience. We watched in bewilderment as the child actors performed the story of Ali Baba and Forty Thieves. The sound effects created in front of us like knocking on the wall of the cave before entering and neighing of horses while being tied were astonishing.

But the most astonishing thing in Vidya masi's home was the fact that there was no fighting! Our older cousins played their favourite musical instruments in the evening. The youngest Ashok was still studying in college. Even Chand masi's boys and girls did not seem to fight amongst themselves. Satish and I absorbed it but were nonplussed. Vidya masi tried to tell us that we needed discipline. That was an alien word and concept.

We admitted as much when we returned to Satya bua's house in Central Lane. She asked, "Did you like living at Vidya masi's house?"

"Yes," I blurted out.

"What did you find different?" she persisted.

"Discipline," Satish said.

That evoked hearty laughter all around though we did not know what it meant.

From the neighbourhood a tall, skinny girl named Cuckoo, always accompanied by her cheeky younger sister, used to visit the house in Central Lane. They seemed so smart and adventurous that I followed them one afternoon to wander in the adjoining lanes of the locality. While crossing the road where a number of cars were speeding, Cuckoo and her sister nonchalantly put one step in front of the other, and started to walk across. I must have thought of it a great idea and followed them, imitating their steps. The cars swerved or slowed to let us cross while honking their horns. Amongst the cars was a black one, which I did not recognize; as it happened, my father and uncle were sitting in this car. The girls triumphantly skipped on to their house.

When I returned home, I was summoned to the living room where elders sat and chatted. I was surprised to see my father along with my uncle. My father had obviously come from Amritsar for some work. His expression was stern as he enquired, "What were you doing on the road?"

I stammered, “I was crossing the road with the girls.”

“If you have decided to get killed in Delhi, then it is alright,” he said.

He also said that it was time we got back to school. The holidays were over!

As we packed up, we managed to stow some novel games and toys that we had received in Delhi. It was late October 1948 when we returned to Amritsar.

Epilogue

After that, we made further trips to Satya *bua*'s house as part of our summer vacations. Most memorable was the year we returned and I had not done my assigned homework for summer. I had even thought I would finish it during the night while travelling in the Frontier Mail. The predictable punishment of standing on the bench and caning in DAV school appeared justified.

Even as a child it did not take me very long to understand that my father's half-brother Taya Diwan Chand had not helped him in Delhi. Further, he did not help his wife, Tai Sheila, who had to raise our 'cousin' Ramesh all by herself. But most surprising was the fact I learned as a teen ager - that Ramesh was my real brother, not my cousin. He was my mother's first-born son who had been given to Sheila Tai to adopt. ❖

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