

Sour Grapes



Vinod K. Puri

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.

In 1947-48, there really was no reason to find the grapevine in the front yard of our house in Amritsar. The arid plains of Punjab were not the place where grapes grew. My earliest memories of the vine were of a full flourishing cover along the high back wall of the substantial yard. This wall separated the house from the open fields of Goal Bagh that led towards the railway station. The grounds were separated from the wall by a foot-wide open drain. The empty space was mostly a temporary resting place among the trees for the nomads and beggars. They would set up their makeshift tents for a few days. Early in the morning, from the top floor of the house I could see the women scouring their aluminium pots and pans.

When in bloom, the vine even covered the front wall that separated the grounds of more travelled Goal Bagh. The thick rich green leaves would appear in the winter to cover the tops of both walls. There was another creeper with green heart-shaped leaves simply called 'glo' that mingled with grapevine over the front wall but never over the back wall. This hardy climber was noted for the leaves that resembled the *paan* (betel-nut leaves) exactly except for the bitter taste. The unfamiliar, especially young visitors to the house, would often put them in their mouths and then violently spit them out.

I even remembered an old black and white photograph that I had seen years ago. I was standing against the back wall without a shirt and glaring at the camera. I was not more than five or six. A stray strand of the grape vine seemed to go around my neck and chest in the grainy photograph. At the time, the yard was paved with bricks, and there were a number of potted plants in tiers against the wall behind which was the grapevine. The other greenery was provided by the two tall bougainvillea bushes which stood besides the thick round pillars at the steps of the verandah.

These bushes would turn into trees, and flank the three wide steps to verandah. They rose up to the second storey and bore copious pink flowers. In the picture, one could see some of the potted plants against the back wall. It would have to be in early 1948. I knew that my family did not own a camera, or even believe in taking pictures!

Who had taken that picture?

My mother's oldest sister, aunt Vidya, had escaped from Lahore after India's Independence and Partition. For more than a year, her large family had stayed with us. They had occupied a full suite of the house with a large common living room. My cousins were much older than my brothers and me. They were either in college or finished with college, the oldest actually working. It was he, Gautam who had taken the picture. He later on went to America, and returned after ten years, as a highly qualified engineer, and worked for Caltex, the company with red flying winged horse on their gas station signs. All the boys and girls in this family were quite talented and besides being well educated, they all played a different musical instrument, varying from violin to tabla. They were well-groomed and sophisticated.

While I was growing up, they were the ones against whom all comparisons were made. I remember accompanying one of the daughters, Sharda to the inner city bazaar in Namak Mandi. Sharda went there twice a week to a hakim for a special eye powder, the *surma*, which was reputed to improve your vision. We would walk to Lohgar Gate, and go past the burnt out houses and rubble left over after the riots of India's partition in 1947. It would be years before the worst affected areas of the city were cleared and new modest houses built.

Later, I realized that I was her chaperone, not that Sharda ever met anyone. She would sweetly indulge me by holding my hand and talking to me.

Of course, it was well-known that my brothers and I could never measure up to the five or six of these brothers and sisters. The only consolation was that, within a year, Vidya aunt's family relocated to Delhi, and the cousins were somewhat distant and remote. The old cadaverous uncle and haughty aunt had now taken refuge in the spacious government-allotted house of her sister Chand masi, another aunt in New Delhi. In years to come, an occasional visit to the old aunt in Patel Nagar was sufficient to pay my respects. She lived with her only unmarried son. She always had a superior air and despised of my mother, or other uncles and aunts and their children. In her view, they were mostly petty shopkeepers and not the exalted 'servicemen' with guaranteed government jobs and pensions.

Back to the vine.

The fact that nobody looked after the vine, and yet it flourished was something of a mystery. It would dry up and shrivel to nothing in the summer heat. Then, the rains would come in July/August, and the vine would sprout green leaves. The tender red leaves would turn purple, and then green. Thin tendrils sprouted and climbed along the wall. The grapes, when they appeared, were tiny and green. My young friends would often pluck them. They would taste the grapes, and spit them out, as they were sour and bitter.

The grapes did grow larger and red, with a whitish powdery deposit covering them. Every year, I would hear someone talk about how to take care of the vine so that the grapes would grow and become sweet. How often I heard of the advice of 'experts' that you need to pour blood of a goat in the soil from which the vine grew. "That is what turns the grapes red."

This invariable comment would come from unlikely sources. Did old aunt Shanti from Gurdaspur know something about growing grapes? After all her husband owned farmland, and they grew wheat and what not! The former family servant Ami, who was now employed by the electricity board, would show up unexpectedly. While he chatted with my mother, who obligingly sent the current servant for a glass of lassi or sweet milky tea, he listened intently. Ami carried some undefined authority with us, the children. He was reputed to have arrived at our house when he was eight, and had grown up in the household, learning cooking and getting rudimentary education. Ami was thin and short, with sharp features and well combed hair. His clothes, unlike those of other servants, were always clean.

So, once, I asked Ami when my mother was called away by a neighbour. “Ami, do you know how to feed the grapevine so the grapes are red and sweet?” He was sitting on the floor next to a low stool my mother had occupied in the inner courtyard. “Of course!” he offered confidently, “You have to get *bakri*’s (goat) blood, at least half a bucket.”

I had wondered why my father never asked my older brothers or me, or our servant Bansi to get the blood of a goat. We usually went twice a week to the *jhatkai*’s (butcher’s) shop to buy meat, or get a live chicken dressed. This chore was always left to the men in the family. Most of the time, my vegetarian mother even refused to enter the kitchen to cook meat, so there was no question of her buying meat or fish!

By this time, the potted plants had disappeared. My mother always claimed that the best gardeners were Muslims, and, of course, they had left for Pakistan after Independence.

The yard was spacious enough to serve as grounds for impromptu cricket and volleyball games. These were not real cricket games, as the ball was either a hard rubber ball or a discarded tennis ball. But we were aware of the dangers of rambunctious play. After all, I remembered what would have passed for a ‘sixer’ had knocked out the neighbour’s high window pane! I had to apologize to Mrs Mehra, and also receive a hiding from my mother.

We played volleyball with just a sturdy string stretched across the middle of the yard. Of course, we even argued about whether the ball had gone over or under the string serving as the ‘net’. My friends and my brothers’ friends would gather for the games in a hurry when my mother went out and were equally adept at disappearing when she was sighted in Goal Bagh by a lookout.

Years earlier, my father had put up a shed for the cow that we had started to keep at the advice of some swami. The cow’s milk was supposed to be good for my father’s various ailments. The shed against the front wall was barely a bricked-in room covered by a corrugated tin sheet, and was also used for storage of fresh fodder or straw. We kept the cow there at night during the cold winter months.

The big change in the yard occurred when my father decided to put up a cemented floor for washing the carpets. The floor stretched up to the back wall. Right up against the back wall were built three water tanks in a row. The slightly raised platform made the yard uneven, and unfit for our games.

There was a carnival air about the whole carpet washing enterprise. My father and his three partners would join on Sundays. One of the partners, Jugal Kishore, had three boys

of around my age, and they would also come. We were assigned simple chores like using the hand pump for pumping water. We had to fill the three cement tanks with water for use. A few *annas* (16 annas = 1 rupee) that we made from this work seemed like a fortune at the time. I remember never to have earned a full rupee.

If we tried more strenuous work, such as using the triangular flat iron mounted on a long pole shaped like a squeegee, to drain water and chemicals from the carpets, we found we were not up to it. The sequence of subjecting the carpets to liquid caustic soda and bleach and finally soapy *reetha* (soapnut)—water assured that the dyed wool would last years. The pungent smells of these chemicals was all over the yard on washing days. The new oriental carpets were actually the only ones that were meticulously prepared before shipping to the dealers in Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. The new wool left furry hair like fibres on the back of the carpet.

Only the Kashmiri Karima knew how to use the burner to singe the thin woollen ‘hair’. He would expertly use this kerosene instrument like a small flamethrower, which filled the air with burnt wool smell. Apparently, the flat surface of the back of carpet was used by the businessmen to estimate the number of knots. More knots to a square inch, finer the weave!

At noontime, my mother would arrange for lunch of *pranthas* for close to twenty people. Initially, my father had failed to inform my mother that Jugal Kishore was a strict vegetarian, who did not eat even onions. She tried her best to remove onions from the boiled spicy potatoes. Jugal Kishore, the bald lawyer who actually never practiced law and wore a pith helmet in public, opened a prantha on his plate, took one sniff and pushed the plate away. He had smelled the onions in his prantha. My mother was mortified.

Stocky and balding Karima, a Muslim, would quietly slip away upstairs to say his midday *namaaz* before eating the lunch he had brought from home. He made do with two or three thick *rotis*. At the most, he would ask for some buttermilk or *achaar* that he would receive standing on the threshold of the kitchen. As a Muslim, he was not welcome in my mother’s kitchen.

We knew him to be a loyal and good worker for many years who was also a very devout Muslim. At medium height, he was older than my father and his partners, but always treated as a servant. He was powerfully built, bow legged with strong muscular arms. His round head was covered with short grey hair. His round face was still unlined, and he had the typical pink and pale complexion of the Kashmiris.

After washing, the wet dripping carpets were carried by labourers upstairs to the large balcony, where they were tied and hung over the balustrade to dry. It would take them up to three days while they dripped water over the front yard next to the verandah steps.

Karima’s special talent was to cut and trim the woollen pile of the washed carpets. The special long scissors were flat, sharp and used with two hands. Karima usually did it upstairs in the *baradari*, alone on a day when he was not working at his regular job at Oriental Carpet Company. He used a big round log to drape the carpet and move from one end to the other. When he was finished, the thick but even pile of soft carpets was a pleasure to touch. He was really the only professional among the carpet washing ‘team’.

A year or so later, he would supervise a crew of three or four daily-wage labourers. By that time, a tap had been installed in the corner bathroom and the hand-pump was just there for emergencies. Now the water was piped through a rubber hose into the cement tanks.

The cow shed was long gone even before my father died. Instead, a toilet and bathroom were built in the corner of the yard close to the gate. The family had finally installed a flush toilet with Indian style (squat) latrine.

I often thought that whether the grape vine died because of carpet washing. It could be the caustic soda and other chemicals like bleach that flowed into the ground. I remembered the muddy red coloured water that would be squeezed out of the carpets during washing and as it flowed into the open drains.

But I do not remember when that had happened. For years, I had lived in other cities for my studies. Later, I had lived abroad, and visits to the old house were infrequent. By the 1990s, there was a new iron-gate opening into the street. Instead of stepping up to the yard, now you had to step down into the yard.

I had noted with dismay, during one my visits, that one of my overweight nephews played ‘cricket’ with three or four of his adult friends in the yard. Their yells and screams and thwack of bat on ball were very different than what I remembered from my own childhood. Later, he had the back wall broken to allow for a gate, so he could bring his car into the yard for parking.

Epilogue

The other large house, owned by the Mehra family, opposite to ours had been sold, flattened to the ground, and replaced by six smaller houses. Thus had ended the association with the Mehra family, long ago referred to as *tel wale* (oil people) as they owned business related to selling petrol and trucking. Then, within a few years, my nephews had managed to sell my ancestral house. The house I was born in, as were all my siblings, now belonged to a buyer, who I saw once at the courthouse.

© Vinod Puri 2015